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THE NARRATION OF A DIVIDED NATION: READING BREXIT NOVELS AS CONTEMPORARY CONDITION OF ENGLAND NOVELS

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Abstract

The main aim of this thesis is to investigate the newly emerged subgenre of the Brexit novel, identifying its formal characteristics, main themes, and pragmatic functions. Since the Brexit referendum in 2016, many novels have been published that either explicitly or implicitly focus on the Brexit moment. This dissertation aims to contribute to the ongoing debate on this topic, exploring the correlation between the subgenre of the Brexit novel and the tradition of the social novel in English literature, specifically the Victorian Condition of England novel. The two subgenres, in fact, share some commonalities, including an emphasis on social observations and the depiction of a period of national turmoil. Therefore, the study of these novels requires an understanding of the historical, cultural, and social contexts. The early Victorian age and the present moment have both triggered questions regarding identity and social problems. The emergence of literary subgenres like the Condition of England novel and the Brexit novel relate to the contemporary social situation and engage with political issues. This thesis aims to explore the textual forms and the cultural and political implications of a parallel between Condition of England novels and Brexit novels. The study of the two subgenres considers their historical and political context, core themes, and stylistic features, comparing them through a detailed textual analysis and highlighting their similarities. In fact, the two subgenres not only result from a similar social and political context but also share various themes, similar stylistic elements, and the same aims. Both subgenres aim to provide readers with an alternative perspective of society and push for social change and for more empathetic forms of national belonging. By studying and comparing these two literary subgenres, the thesis seeks to shed light on the emergence of the Brexit novel and connect it to a broader literary tradition, understanding its role and potential in the debate about the state of the nation.

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INTRODUCTION

> At first glance, at least, literary studies present itself
> as an attractive alternative to the banality of Brexit.
> Here is where we do the thinking it seems
> that our political culture can no longer support.
> (Eaglestone 2018, 10)

On June 23, 2016, Great Britain made a historic decision that would alter its national history for the foreseeable future. The project of exiting the European Union turned into reality, and "Brexit" quickly became a well-known refrain in political discourses. The economic and political consequences of the referendum are still unfolding, even after long years of bargaining with the EU. However, the most immediate and visible outcome of Brexit has been, without any doubt, the national fracture it has uncovered. On the morning of the referendum's results, the country appeared divided. The side that voted to leave felt victorious and arrogantly proud. On the contrary, the side that wanted to remain in the EU was shocked and expressed its astonishment by calling for a new referendum. The ideological differences between those who supported Brexit (the Leavers) and those who opposed it (the Remainers) crystallised into opposed identities, which saturated the nation with reciprocal antipathy and conflict. Brexit exacerbated the social and cultural divisions, contributing to Great Britain's identity crisis.

Understandably, such an important event as the choice to leave the European Union has also shocked the British cultural *milieu*. There has been an ongoing debate on the causes and the possible consequences of Brexit. Literature has been one of the arenas in which these questions were debated. Literature plays a vital role in society as it assesses, analyses, and potentially challenges political and social phenomena and, at the same time, connects with individuals. Literature's engagement with society aims to influence the national discourse and encourage positive change. Through the portrayal of diverse characters and situations, literature represents a multifaceted national community and creates a platform through which readers can engage with

complex themes and ideas. In doing so, literature offers a unique perspective on society and its functioning, allowing individuals to reflect on their own experiences.

Therefore, the Brexit referendum has engendered a considerable literary production. Within months of the vote, several novels depicting contemporary Britain and the referendum to leave the EU emerged. These novels have gained the label of "Brexit novels" as they aim to outline the social, political, and cultural causes and consequences of Brexit. Brexit novels developed from the necessity to enter into dialogue with the contemporary moment, addressing a time of crisis that is not only political but also identitarian. The Brexit novel is a new and still evolving subgenre, but its appearance has given rise to a surprisingly wide opus of critical work that aims to define the subgenre and its formal characteristics. The purpose of this thesis is to identify the key features of the Brexit novel by connecting it to the tradition of the social problem novel in English literature to determine both continuity and change. This approach allows for the delimitation of the subgenre's spatial and temporal coordinates and its formal and ideological boundaries. The dissertation formulates and investigates the hypothesis that Brexit novels share some central characteristics with a previous subgenre: the Victorian Condition of England novel. The comparison between the two subgenres is articulated through textual analysis and close reading, supported by a background of critical, historical, and sociological studies. The thesis aims to substantiate the idea that the two subgenres share a similar historical and political context, as well as aims, motives, and formal and thematic features. The present study compares Brexit novels and Condition of England novels to explore their commonalities and to critically frame the new subgenre of the Brexit novel as an updated version of the Condition of England novel.

I.1 Brexit Novels as Updated Forms of Condition-of-England Novels: a Critical Hypothesis

The primary purpose of this thesis is to explore and analyse the relationship between the newly emerged subgenre of the Brexit novel and the tradition of the social novel in English literature, particularly the Victorian Condition of England novel. The Brexit novel has gained significant attention for its engagement with the political, social, and cultural implications of the Brexit referendum. On the other hand, the Condition of England novel has been a prominent subgenre in English literature since the 19th

century, portraying the harsh living conditions of marginalised individuals. Despite their differences, both subgenres share certain similarities, such as a focus on social commentary, political critique, and the portrayal of a moment of national crisis. This dissertation aims to establish a historical-literary, thematic, and formal connection between these two literary subgenres.

First, the study of the novels should be supported by the reconstruction of the historical, cultural, and social contexts. In fact, both historical periods registered a significant shift in society: economic crisis, profound discontent, and poverty provoked the reaction of people who felt the need to raise their voices and protest against their condition. The deep changes that modified the social fabric during the Industrial Revolution caused the emergence of new social forces and problems and a realignment of the government in the way of dealing with them. Similarly, in recent years, the decline of the industrial economy in Great Britain (which started in the 1980s), the immigration crisis, and the failure of party politics to respond to the needs of the poor highlighted the inequalities of British society and contributed to the emotional vote for Brexit.

It is pivotal to notice that the social changes of these periods also entail an identity crisis. When society is transforming so fast, as it happened both during the early Victorian period and in recent years, people fail to adjust to the changing world around them. In the early Victorian age, many of the pillars of English national identity were faltering under the growing industrial culture. The landed gentry was beginning to lose power because of a shift from rural and traditional ways of life to urban and industrial ones. New philosophies such as Utilitarianism and evolutionism and the development of psychological studies obliged people to reconsider many of their beliefs, especially the centrality of religion and the authority of the Anglican Church, creating a sense of historical rupture from previous generations (Adams 2009, 33).[1] Moreover, the rise of industrial capitalism and the spread of political economy ideas established individualism and the pursuit of self-interest as the central force of social and economic life, leading individuals to see themselves in conflict with other

[1] For instance, in 1829, the "Catholic Emancipation Act" gave Catholic people the right to vote and to be elected. The Act was seen as an attack on one of the staples of English identity, Anglicanism, and petitions from all over the country were sent to the Parliament. Interestingly, many petitions were signed in small villages where the presence of Catholic people (mainly Irish) was rare (Colley 2005, 329-331). A similar phenomenon was registered in 2016 during the Brexit campaign. Various studies revealed how anti-immigrant sentiments were particularly strong in those counties where the percentage of immigrants was lower (see Maccaferri 2019).

individuals (Adams 2009, 18). This was contrasted by big social movements – for example, Chartism[2] –favoured by the emergence of new social classes, such as the working class and the bourgeoisie, which started to elaborate a class consciousness and fight for their place in society.

Similarly, nowadays, fast-paced changes affecting British society are causing an identity crisis. The advent of globalisation blurred national borders and favoured the movement of people and capital from all corners of the world.[3] Economic crisis and austerity augmented the gulf between rich and poor. Disadvantaged people are hit more harshly by globalised capitalism because of the relocation of many industries in poorer countries and the weakening of immigration laws (due to European membership), which favours the provision of cheap labour from abroad. Poor people feel economically disenfranchised and, at the same time, "attacked" by the emergence of multiculturalism, gender equality and other ideological battles in which they do not recognise themselves.[4] Concurrently, the middle class is also becoming poorer. People feel less represented by party politics, which seems far from their needs. Like the Chartist protests in 1838 and the civil battles to obtain parliamentary reforms, the Brexit referendum in 2016 was used as a channel to be heard by the central government. As Linda Colley argues, the early Victorian period was the last period of actual engagement of the British population with social and political reform (see Colley 2005). People's power, mainly through petitions and protests, directly affected the passing of many reforms (Marshall 2002, 22). Similarly, some commentators have defined Brexit as a "quiet revolution" against neoliberal globalisation (Seidler 2018, 132). The vote to leave the EU has come mainly from working-class people but also from the impoverished middle class (in particular, from Middle England counties), which had a central role in driving Great Britain out of Europe (Shaw 2021, 190). It

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[2] The Chartist movement was a working-class mobilisation. It was launched in 1838 with the publication of "The People's Charter," a document calling for political reform and the extension of the franchise to all male adults. Chapter 1 of the thesis investigates the central role of Chartism in the Early Victorian age.

[3] As Cathal McCall argues: "Contemporary globalization has been commonly understood to be a process that eases and speeds the movement of goods, services, capital and knowledge, with major implications for the configuration of modern state territorial borders. Global information flows, the global movement of capital, and global media and culture have serviced a debordering debate." (Wilson and Donnan 2012, 214). See *A Companion to Border Studies*, edited by Thomas M. Wilson and Hastings Donnan, 2012.

[4] The disenfranchised poor have been labelled in the Brexit rhetoric as "the left behind." James Morrison describes the characteristics of this social group in his 2022 book *The Left Behind: Reimagining Britain's Socially Excluded*. The role of the left behind in the Brexit referendum and in Brexit novels is analysed in Chapter 2, section 2.1, and again in Chapter 3, section 3.3.

was a vote against the liberal and urban elites and the government, which seemed blind to the situation of the majority of citizens.

Exploiting the long British tradition of Euroscepticism, UKIP leader Nigel Farage[5] and the Leave parties redirected the anger of these voters towards the European Union: an external enemy that represented the perfect scapegoat, preventing the government from taking direct responsibility for the problems of British society. The opposition to the Continent has had a long history in the British discourse around national identity. British identity has been essentially built around the conflict with the European Other, mainly French and Catholic (Colley 2005, 5-6). The French Revolution in 1789 and the subsequent Napoleonic Wars (1793-1815) were central events in building this anti-European rhetoric. During the Victorian age, the worry of a revolution haunted the British mind (a motive that emerges in many novels). This was connected to the fear of being invaded by Napoleonic forces and the necessity of maintaining Great Britain's independence from the foreign enemy. This fear of invasion (O'Toole 2018), linked to the idea of British exceptionalism, has come a long way from the Napoleonic Wars to Brexit and the European Union (passing from other fundamental steps, such as the Second World War and the Nazi threat, as will be argued later). The perception of being controlled by the bureaucrats of Brussels and of losing sovereignty was central in the Brexit rhetoric and exploited an idea present in the British identity discourse since the Reformation.

The early Victorian age and the present historical moment triggered questions regarding identity and social problems and how to solve them. This is fundamental to understanding the emergence of literary subgenres such as the Condition of England novel and the Brexit novel. Both subgenres relate to the contemporary social situation and engage with the political issues central to their time. As Gail Marshall suggests, the most interesting product of the early Victorian age is not a political revolution but a politically responsible form of fiction: the Condition of England novel (Marshall 2002, 37-38). The Condition of England novel describes the challenges of the advent of an industrial society and its social consequences, particularly regarding the working class. Its function was to bridge the chasm of class division, even if only in fiction (Flint 1987, 8). The Condition of England novel "aims at directly influencing human

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[5] Even if posing as a "man of the people", Nigel Farage belongs to the financial elite of the City of London and is close to the spheres of socioeconomic power.

relations, either in general or with reference to one particular set of circumstances" (Cazamian 1973, 8) and finds a space of dialogue and collaboration between the different social actors. Nowadays, writers are again stepping forward to fill that divide and recover a renovated sense of belonging. In the post-Brexit moment, British authors have recovered the State of the Nation novel to explain the reasons behind the Leave vote and offer an alternative discourse around the nation (Shaw 2021, 190). Brexit novels,

> betray a further purpose, gesturing towards more inclusive and diverse forms of public culture, identifying the social divisions affecting the nation, and engaging in a struggle with British society and its prevailing political climate. In this way, they espouse an outward-looking cosmopolitan engagement as a form of resistance to an increasingly nationalistic and inward-looking cultural landscape. (Eaglestone 2018, 27-28)

Brexit novels depict and criticise the current situation while, at the same time, they aim to provide readers with an alternative perspective of society and push for solidarity between the classes and social change. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the similar motivations behind the emergence of these two subgenres. The purpose of this thesis is to investigate how the Condition of England novel and the Brexit novel interact with society. Both the authors of Condition of England novels and the authors of Brexit novels employ narration as a tool to represent the state of the nation, at the same time furthering a new idea of national community.

The perspective underpinning this message is unarguably a privileged one, despite the fact that there is a corpus of Condition of England novels written by working-class writers and members of the Chartist movement.[6] The writers of the Condition of England novels analysed in this thesis are all members of the bourgeoisie. Their perspective on the exploitation of the working class comes from a middle-class viewpoint, even if based on first-hand experiences, as is the case with Elizabeth Gaskell. These authors show compassion and empathy towards the poor and try to educate their fellow middle-class readers to promote philanthropy and advocate social

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[6] See, for reference, Ian Haywood, *The Literature of Struggle: An Anthology of Chartist Fiction*, 2016, and Martha Vicinus, "Chartist Fiction and the Development of a Class-Based Literature", in *The Socialist Novel in Britain: Towards the Recovery of a Tradition*, 1982.

reform. Nevertheless, their tone is often patronising, and their support for improving the poor's living conditions does not entail a fundamental change of the status quo. This is evident, for instance, in the general condemnation of Chartism due to an underlying fear of a social revolution.[7] The same tendency appears to operate at the core of Brexit novels. The overall perception is that the literary response to Brexit comes from a cultural elite, which inevitably speaks from a privileged standpoint. Brexit novels are almost exclusively written by Remainers.[8] Some Brexit novels – such as Jonathan Coe's *Middle England* (2018) or Sam Byers' *Perfidious Albion* (2018) – are pervaded with a patronising tone, even when they acknowledge the social causes of Brexit and the condition of the poor. Brexit novels expose a Remainer point of view for the Remainer public (as Condition of England novels were written for middle-class readers), a fact that has highlighted the risk "that the literary discussion of such critical national and global concerns will simply create another leftist echo chamber that neither heals nor speaks to an already fractious nation" (Eaglestone 2018, 27). Consequently, even if the aim of Condition of England and Brexit novels is to represent the state of the nation with a view to social betterment and the hope for a united national community, the analysis always inevitably connects their ostensible social function with the situatedness and cultural "interests" of their authors.

Another aspect of Condition of England novels and Brexit novels that this thesis considers is their shared themes. The two subgenres appear to have many themes in common due to historical similarities and a desire to engage with society through literature. Different topics in Condition of England novels resurface and become central in Brexit novels. These include the theme of the national divide, the interest in representing the poor, the theme of immigration, the depiction of women as an ideal social mediator and the focus on questions of national identity, often linked to nostalgic rhetoric. The way in which these themes are explored and the reasons that stand behind their choice are particularly pertinent to the two groups of novels considered in this thesis. In fact, these themes focus on social and political factors,

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[7] Michael Gardiner, in *The Constitution of English Literature: The State, the Nation and the Canon*, argues that English literature since the 1780s (following the French Revolution) was established as a containment of revolutionary movements. Drawing from Burke's ideas about revolution/restoration and the concept of reformation at the base of Whig's politics, the author maintains that the role of literature was to ensure that the status quo was maintained for centuries.

[8] Eurosceptic novels dealing with the Brexit moment are less frequent and less well-known. *Kompromat*, by Stanley Johnson (Boris Johnson's father), is a relevant example of a pro-Brexit novel. The novels discussed in this thesis are all critical of the referendum result.

which are key to exploring the state of the nation. One of the main themes is the representation of the nation as a divided entity. In fact, various Brexit novels, such as Ali Smith's *Winter* (2018) and Byers' *Perfidious Albion*, have in common the presence of characters who epitomise the national divide (between Leave and Remain), showing how pivotal the question of a divided nation is in the cultural debate surrounding Brexit. This is inherently connected to the image of a class-driven British society, in which class divisions are a central issue. Representing the working classes as opposed to the upper classes, especially those possessing economic and cultural means, is a key component of the Victorian social problem novel. In the same way, class division and the inability of the upper classes to communicate with the poor and understand their needs have been fundamental concerns that have favoured the Leave victory in the Brexit referendum. The Brexit vote has been a vote against the liberal elites, and that is why many Brexit novels focus on the working classes. Some Brexit novels, such as Niall Griffiths' *Broken Ghost* (2019) and Anthony Cartwright's *The Cut* (2017), depict left-behind characters to offer a less biased picture of the working class in contemporary Britain. Other novels, like Coe's *Middle England* or Ali Smith's seasonal quartet, tend to juxtapose the working class with the liberal elite, often describing the poor from a patronising perspective. This representation is influenced by the depiction of the working class in the Condition of England novel, one of the first subgenres which involved working-class characters. Moreover, the division of the nation is conceived in both class and geographical terms. Both subgenres portray the theme of the differences between the rural south and the industrial north and between the country and the city. Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1854) and Amanda Craig's *The Lie of the Land* (2017) are exemplary of the interest in configuring England's divided geography. Female characters often interpret the role of mediator between the two parts of the divide (both class and geographical). In Condition of England novels, like Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1849) and Gaskell's *North and South*, as well as in Brexit novels, like Ali Smith's *Winter* (2108) and *Spring* (2019), the main characters are young girls who, offering a different perspective on society, manage to reconcile people across the divide, finding a way for them to communicate with empathy.

Another theme integral to both Condition of England novels and Brexit novels is the idealisation of the past. Nostalgia has been a central element of the Brexit rhetoric. The Leavers have used the recovery of a better past to appeal to those voters

who failed to recognise themselves in the contemporary world. This is analysed in Brexit novels such as Mellissa Harrison's *All Among the Barley* (2018) and Sarah Moss' *Ghost Wall* (2018), which consider the danger of nostalgia and its consequences. In Condition of England novels, as in much literature, the theme of a "golden age" is present but not problematised. Condition of England novelists, such as Benjamin Disraeli in *Sybil or The Two Nations* (1845), call for a return to rural England, where family values counted more than economic profit. During the campaign for Brexit, the Leavers and right-wing parties associated nostalgia with the idea of an ethnically pure past and a refusal of multiculturalism. This is related to another central theme in Brexit novels: immigration and the encounter with the foreign Other. The increase in immigration and the xenophobic idea that immigrants come to "steal our jobs" was a central point of discussion during the Brexit referendum campaign. Interestingly, this same rhetoric was already detectable in Victorian times, when it was addressed towards Irish immigrants who were despised for accepting lower wages than English workers. Immigration and its consequences on the economic and social fabric were already explored in Condition of England novels (for instance, in Disraeli's *Sybil*) and resurfaced in Brexit novels (such as in John Lanchester's *The Wall* (2018)). The relationship with Otherness[9] and the need to overcome the rhetoric of conflict between equally marginalised people is central in both subgenres.

In addition to the analysis of themes and motifs, the thesis explores the style of the selected novels. Interestingly, while the two subgenres share themes and pragmatic functions, they pursue their cultural objectives through different stylistic features. Condition of England novels are very consistent regarding the narrative structure and the style. The authors adopt realism to describe the living and working conditions of the poorer classes and oppose with concrete evidence the abstract principles of Utilitarianism (Cazamian 1973, 5). This is realised through detailed descriptions and references to real-life events and situations, often borrowed from journals and governmental reports. The documentary realism of Condition of England novels is counter-balanced by using some stylistic elements typical of melodrama and romance. This entails, for instance, the typical opposition between good and bad and an emphasis on deep feelings and tearful scenes. The melodramatic focus on human emotions was an adequate instrument to oppose the utilitarian rhetoric that reduced

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[9] The use of this term will be contextualized in the next section.

human action to statistics and numbers (Guy 1996, 119-120). These stylistic features are equally employed in all the Condition of England novels analysed.

Brexit novels, instead, present a wide range of styles, narrative structures, and genres: they can be dystopian novels, crime novels, psychological novels, and historical novels. Despite the variety of genres, Brexit novels can be divided into two main groups: the first group includes fictions which focus on the political side of the Brexit event, the way the campaign has been conducted, and its extreme consequences. This group includes, for instance, Byers' *Perfidious Albion*, Lanchester's *The Wall*, and Coe's *Middle England*. The second group consists of more intimate and psychological novels, which depict the consequences Brexit had on people and their everyday lives. This comprises, among others, Cartwright's *The Cut*, Griffiths' *Broken Ghost*, Moss' *Ghost Wall*, and Harrison's *All Among the Barley* (Alessio 2020, 144). This division is useful for exploring the different ways in which the authors deal with the Brexit event and its outcomes.

The formal analysis of the Condition of England novels and Brexit novels would, at first sight, make it impossible to compare the highly consistent style of the former with the generic and stylistic variety of the latter. This is due to the fact that they arise from two different moments in the development of the novel as a genre. In the 1830s, when the Condition of England novels became an established subgenre, the novel was starting to be considered a serious form of writing which dealt with real life and significant social and political questions. Novelists wanted to educate the readers, and although they retained romantic plot and melodramatic features, they adopted realism as the privileged medium to convey the seriousness of their mission. In the last centuries, the novel as a genre underwent significant modifications in style, form, and intentions. In the previous decades, in particular, the postmodern novel signalled the abandonment of the idea that literature could interpret society. Playfulness, irony, and metanarrative are the instruments through which most postmodern authors read the world. In many postmodern novels, there is no direct engagement with social events. However, in recent years, there has been a new wave of novels that adopt realism and return to the linear plot of the traditional novel.[10] This new development in the history of the novel is still under inspection by literary critics and is uncertainly labelled as

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[10] When I refer to the traditional novel, I mean the form of the novel which follows the canonical characteristics determined by the "nineteenth-century paradigm", as mentioned in Mazzoni's *Teoria del Romanzo*.

"post-postmodernism", "metamodernism",[11] or "hypermodernism" (ipermodernità).[12] In "hypermodern" novels, everyday life has once again become the setting where the pursuit of collective and individual values is performed (Donnarumma 2014, pos. 1060). Even if they maintain some aspects of postmodern novels (together with a certain degree of scepticism), hypermodern novels recover, as well, the modernist idea of a dialectic between words and things.[13] Moreover, contemporary novels show a renewed interest in describing reality. History is again at the centre of narration, and "quello a cui assistiamo ora è appunto un ritorno alle forme del realismo nel loro intento di raccontare storie verosimili o vere senz'altro."[14] (Donnarumma, 2014, pos. 4151). Brexit novels can be categorised under this new kind of realistic fiction that is heavily inspired by political and social themes and appears to revive a more traditional form of narration. Most of the novels examined in this thesis embrace a realist mode and linear plots, completely eschewing the relish for citationality and metanarrative that is typical of many postmodern novels.[15] Moreover, Brexit novels engage with contemporary reality, trying to decipher and understand the present social and political moment, avoiding the scepticism of postmodernism. Central is a hermeneutic desire to provide a meaning for an era of trouble, uncovering its underlying causes and foresee its consequences.

This is the reason why Brexit novelists employ some stylistic features of the Condition of England novels. Many Brexit novels deal with real-life events, often described with documentary precision. The authors use realism to denounce the condition of the poor in Great Britain today, in the same way as Victorian novelists used to describe the miseries of their time. Also, the stylistic choice of setting the story

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[11] The first critical works on metamodernism are Timotheus Vermeulen's and Robin van den Akker's "Notes on Metamodernism", 2010, and the essay "Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution" by David James and Urmila Seshagiri, 2014.

[12] In this thesis, I adopt Raffaele Donnarumma's terms: *ipermoderno* ("hypermodern") and *ipermodernità* ("hypermodernism"). See Raffaele Donnarumma, *Ipermodernità, dove va la narrativa contemporanea*, 2014.

[13] "In this new phase, history has started to move again, conflicts are starting to manifest themselves again, the friction between intellectual life and political-economic structures has become productive again" (Donnarumma 2014, pos. 1837, my translation).

[14] "What we are witnessing now is precisely a return to the forms of realism in their intent to tell stories that are plausible or certainly true." (Donnarumma, 2014, pos. 4151, my translation).

[15] A notable exception is Ali Smith's seasonal quartet. Smith employs a postmodern style, rich in citations, self-reflective language, and collage-like plot structure. At the same time, her concerns with questions of ethics avoid the typical postmodern scepticism, aligning her work with Modernism (see Germanà and Horton 2013). Form and content are strictly linked in her novels and charged with a political mission. For this reason, the seasonal quartet better exemplifies the new wave of hypermodernity as the mixture of postmodern and modern elements.

in the past is present both in Condition of England novels (as in Brontë's *Shirley*) and in Brexit novels (as in Harrison's *All Among the Barley*). The narrative strategy of describing a past event to analyse a present situation enables authors to separate themselves from the topic they are presenting, which, in both cases, is contemporary and, therefore, in progress. For the same reason, some Brexit novels are set in the future. Lastly, the representation of the nation as divided assumes a dichotomic characterisation in both subgenres. Characters that stand as (sometimes flat) epitomes of the different faces of the country are present both in Condition of England novels and Brexit novels.

As has been outlined so far, there are many reasons to draw a parallel between the Victorian subgenre of the Condition of England novel and the contemporary subgenre of the Brexit novel. These two, in fact, result from a similar social and political context and share many themes. They also share the same aims, trying to offer an alternative view of British society and to push for a change and more compassionate forms of belonging. In a less obvious way, the two subgenres present similar stylistic features, even if they also have some relevant differences. This thesis aims to explore the textual forms and the cultural and political implications of a parallel between Condition of England novels and Brexit novels. The analysis of the two subgenres considers their historical and political context, core themes, and stylistic features, comparing them through a detailed textual analysis. By doing so, this dissertation focuses on understanding the similarities and differences between these subgenres and the unique features that make each one distinct. The final purpose is to answer the initial critical hypothesis: can Brexit novels be considered an updated version of Condition of England novels? By studying and comparing these two literary subgenres, the thesis seeks to shed light on the emergence of the Brexit novel, connecting it to a broader literary tradition. To accomplish the task, it is necessary to build a solid critical background as a starting point to delineate the main critical hypothesis and investigate its validity. The subsequent sections describe the methodology and the critical framework that provides the basis for such a study.

I.2 Defining Brexit novels and Condition of England novels: Literary Review

The definition of the new subgenre of the Brexit novel is in itself problematic. In the immediate aftermath of the Brexit referendum, several literary works emerged that

were primarily concerned with Britain's exit from the European Union. These works have since been referred to as "Brexit novels". The appearance of this subgenre can be attributed to the significant political and economic impact of the referendum, which has spurred a renewed interest in exploring the ramifications of this historic decision through the medium of literature. Subsequently, several commentators started studying this new literary phenomenon. The first collection of essays that engages with the relationship between the contemporary political moment and literary production is *Brexit and Literature. Critical and Cultural Responses*, edited by Robert Eaglestone in 2018. In the introduction to the collection, Eaglestone argues that culture played a central role in the Brexit referendum. Brexit "most significantly [it] is an event in culture" (Eaglestone 2018, 1), which united political and economic grievances to cultural issues at the heart of national identity. Literature is the cultural product which is better suited to answer national questions and "play a crucial role in our thought about how we live as individuals and as communities because of its deep involvement with personal and communal identity." (Eaglestone 2018, 2). It is fundamental to examine the type of literature that emerged from Brexit to recognise its characteristics and contextualise the literary outcomes of one of the most tumultuous political moments in the modern history of the United Kingdom. In Kristian Shaw's essay "BrexLit", contained in Eaglestone's collection, the author gives a name to the new subgenre of Brexit Literature: the portmanteau BrexLit.

Kristian Shaw defines BrexLit in the following manner:

> In a post-Brexit landscape, novels are already appearing that could claim the tag of Brexit fiction, or 'BrexLit', reflecting the divided nature of the UK and the ramifications of the referendum. The term BrexLit concerns fictions that either directly respond or imaginatively allude to Britain's exit from the EU, or engage with the subsequent socio-cultural, economic, racial or cosmopolitical consequences of Britain's withdrawal. (Eaglestone 2018, 18)

This first definition of the subgenre contains some debatable points, but scholars seem to agree on the overall description of BrexLit. The term BrexLit refers to works of fiction that engage with the contemporary political and social moment, reading reality through narration and offering an alternative response to a crisis. Nonetheless, Shaw's initial categorisation has shortcomings, as he remains generic and often inconsistent

in his terminology. In fact, he synonymously designates the same set of texts as "BrexLit", "Brexit fiction", "post-Brexit fiction", or as belonging to a "post-Brexit literary landscape" (Heidemann 2020, 678). In his subsequent book *Brexlit: British Literature and the European Project* (2021), the first monograph on Brexit literature, Shaw lists and analyses more than a hundred novels (and some plays). Interestingly, he includes in the category of BrexLit novels written several years before the referendum. He argues that pre-Brexit Europhobic fiction already contains the themes that become central in the discussion about British European membership (Shaw 2021, 44). In Shaw's discussion, the BrexLit subgenre incorporates novels written both prior to and post the Brexit referendum. The former reflects the Euroscepticism widespread in the British mentality and cultural production. The latter constitutes a response to the issues raised by the referendum and is often characterised by a critical perspective on the Leave vote, and it advocates continued European membership. Shaw's inclusion of pre-referendum and post-Brexit fiction underscores the subgenre's ability to capture and reflect broader socio-cultural and political undercurrents and to participate in the ongoing discourse surrounding the United Kingdom's relationship with the European Union.

This thesis only partially accepts Shaw's categorisation of BrexLit. In fact, while the term BrexLit designates different literary forms, mainly novels, but also theatre productions and poetry, this thesis exclusively takes into account Brexit novels. The novel is considered an ideal platform to discuss the state of the nation because it enables the representation of the prevailing social, political, and economic conditions of the national community. English novels have functioned as an implicit sociology, investigating the nation through narration. This idea is substantiated by different critical studies, such as Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983), Patrick Parrinder's *Nation and Novel: The English Novel from its Origin to the Present Day* (2006), and Michael Gardiner's *The Constitution of English Literature: The State, the Nation and the Canon* (2013). Therefore, the study of Brexit novels becomes a medium for analysing the present moment, as represented in the narrative form. Moreover, the corpus of this thesis includes only novels written after the referendum (from 2016 onwards), as it aims to investigate the literary response to the political event itself and how the production of novels has contributed to the debate on the consequences of Brexit. Consequently, this thesis adopts the term "Brexit novels" to indicate the group of novels analysed. Nevertheless, Shaw's argument that the underlying tension that led

to Brexit has been at work for a long time is convincing. The central themes of Brexit novels are recovered not only from the ongoing public debate on certain issues but also from previous literary traditions. The uncertainty of the terminology used to critically frame Brexit literature is symptomatic of the fact that it is a new and developing phenomenon. Brexit itself is not a conclusive event: its economic, political, and cultural consequences are still unfolding.

The corpus of literary criticism about Brexit novels emerged simultaneously as the subgenre it investigates. It is problematic to analyse a literary phenomenon that is still developing and whose borders and direction are still unclear. Nevertheless, Brexit had such an emotional impact on British citizens that not only did the literary world immediately react through the production of novels, but also the academics followed suit in feeling the need to understand and comment on BrexLit. Together with Eaglestone's volume and Shaw's monograph, several commentators have explored the features of this new literary subgenre. Some examples are Christine Berberich in *Brexit and The Migrant Voice. EU Citizens in Post-Brexit Literature and Culture* (2023); Dulcie Everitt in *BrexLit: The Problem of Englishness in Pre- and Post-Brexit Referendum Literature* (2021); Ina Habermann in *The Road to Brexit: A Cultural Perspective on British Attitudes to Europe* (2020); Daniela Keller and Ina Habermann in *Brexit and Beyond: Nation and Identity* (2021). Moreover, a consistent number of articles and various essays on Brexit novels have been published since 2016. All these contributions have been essential in this thesis to assess the novels' historical, thematic, and stylistic characteristics. The studies on the emergence of the subgenre have also been supported by the assessment of the most updated perspectives on contemporary literature. In fact, the analysis of contemporary literature requires a specific methodological approach (as will be clarified later). In this respect, this thesis draws on the work of Raffaele Donnarumma, *Ipermodernità, dove va la narrativa contemporanea* (2014), which acknowledges a return to realism in literature. As mentioned, Donnarumma argues that, in recent years, literature has overcome postmodernity to enter a new era of "hypermodernity" (*ipermodernità*). Nowadays, novels are engaging again with reality and history, going back to being a medium to represent and criticise the present. This shift is particularly evident in the novels that address the Brexit moment. The analysis of these works allows an understanding of the dynamics at work between literature and contemporary society and how narration can serve as a powerful tool for critiquing and shaping the nation.

In addition, the research has been complemented by the still-expanding analyses of the political, economic, and sociological factors at the core of Brexit. Literature is not produced in a void, especially a literary subgenre, such as BrexLit, which is strictly linked to a political event. Therefore, it has been pivotal to explore the social context in which this new subgenre emerged. Contributions such as Danny Dorling and Sally Tomlinson's *Rule Britannia: Brexit and the End of Empire* (2019); Fintan O' Toole's *Heroic Failure: Brexit and the Politics of Pain* (2018); Victor J. Seidler's *Making Sense of Brexit* (2018); Ben Wellings' *English Nationalism, Brexit and the Anglosphere: wider still and wider* (2019); and Veronica Koller's *Discourses of Brexit* (2019), have been a necessary starting point to research the social, political, and most importantly cultural causes of Brexit. This has been fundamental to outlining the background for the appearance of BrexLit and Brexit novels. In addition to these, attention has been paid to numerous articles and essays analysing the statistical aspects of the vote (Matthew Goodwin and Scott Blinder are only two of the main contributors) and exposing the demographic divide of the nation. Finally, apart from academic contributions, it has been important to keep up to date with the most recent developments in the Brexit deal. Newspapers have been irreplaceable sources of news and information regarding Brexit.

This thesis analyses Brexit novels as a contemporary example of the social novel tradition and compares it to the Victorian Condition of England novel. The study preliminarily defines the Condition of England novel and its main characteristics. The Condition of England novel is a literary subgenre which emerged in the early Victorian period (roughly dated between the 1840s and the 1850s). It has been labelled in different ways: social novel, social problem novel, and industrial novel. However, the term Condition of England seems to be the "most inclusive" (Bratlinger and Thesing 2002), as it derives from the philosophy of Thomas Carlyle and his interest towards the poor. Carlyle's "Condition of England Question", which refers to the state of the English working class during the Industrial Revolution, is the main theme of Condition of England novels. The centrality of social issues in these novels imposes a focus on the context in which they developed. The spread of the doctrine of Utilitarianism, which stemmed from the political economy of Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham, and Thomas Malthus, is the background which prompted the responses of philosophers like Carlyle and John Stuart Mill, who were critical of Utilitarians and *laissez-faire* economists. The study of this philosophical environment has been the starting point

for tracing the circumstances in which the Condition of England novel emerged. This has been accompanied by the analysis of the political and social context of early Victorian times. The works of Theodor K. Hoppen, *The Mid-Victorian Generation: 1846-1886* (1998), and Alan J. Kidd, *State, Society, & the Poor in Nineteenth-century England* (1998), have been central in framing the contemporary political issues and understanding the ways of living and thinking of the early Victorian period.

The outlining of the social context has been followed by the study of the subgenre itself. Condition of England novels have been identified as a group since the 1950s. There has been a lot of work around this subgenre, starting from the classic contribution by Louis Cazamian: *The Social Novel in England, 1830-1850: Dickens, Disraeli, Mrs Gaskell, Kingsley* (1973), which defines Condition of England novels and analyses their origin, and particularly their impact on society. The author explores how and to which extent the Victorian Condition of England novels contributed to the political outcomes of the time and what kind of influence the authors of these novels had on their readers. Moreover, Cazamian aims to infer, through the study of these novels, "a movement in public opinion" and "grasp the causes and feelings involved" (Cazamian 1973, 10) in the modifications happening in society at the time. This thought reverberates in this thesis, as one of the aspects this research sets out to assess is the representation, through Brexit novels, of a moment of profound social change, which implicated a revaluation and elaboration of new values. The emphasis on "change" as the driving force behind the idea of culture and the emergence of the social novel is a pivotal theme in Raymond Williams' *Culture and Society: 1780-1950* (1960), which provides another fundamental contribution to the study of Condition of England novels. Williams traces the development of the idea of culture between 1780 and 1950. Culture, for Williams, records the reactions to social changes, such as the rise of industrialism and the advent of democracy, which generated new forms of personal and social relationships (see Williams 1960, XV). The author includes the analysis of a group of Condition of England novels in his discussion, reading them as the response to the significant changes happening in society and, consequently, in culture.[16]

Both Cazamian's and Williams' readings of Condition of England novels have been criticised by Josephine Guy in *The Victorian Social-Problem Novel: The Market,*

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[16] The centrality of Williams' work as a theoretical frame for this thesis will be discussed in detail later.

the Individual and Communal Life (1996). Guy argues that the common mistake in the analysis of this subgenre is the lack of awareness about the different ways of understanding and addressing social problems in Victorian times. Guy maintains that the possible reason for the frequent dismissal of the Condition of England novels as poorly constructed may result from an anachronistic reading. The solutions to social problems proposed by Condition of England novels are frequently judged as weak. Guy argues that the mindset of Victorians emphasises personal agency, implicating that "The problems which they identified in their society were invariably seen to have *individual* causes, and that the solutions which they subsequently advocated invariably recommended changes in their actions and beliefs of *individuals* (rather than changes in social structures)" (Guy 1996, 73). In the Victorian episteme, the answer to social inequalities lay in the hands of virtuous, compassionate individuals. Guy argues that the inability of Condition of England writers to propose a radical social change is due to their lack of awareness of social agency. Guy's argument is helpful in applying a more lucid reading to Condition of England novels, even when accepting the valuable contributions by Cazamian and Williams. Generally, more recent analyses tend to avoid falling into the trap of anachronistic readings. More recent contributions to the study of Condition of England novels are, for example, James Eli Adams' *A History of Victorian Literature* (2009), Carolyn Betensky's *Feeling for the Poor: Bourgeois Compassion, Social Action and the Victorian Novel* (2010), and Gail Marshall's *Victorian Fiction* (2002). These texts explore the Victorian social and political background and the cultural production of the period, with a special emphasis on the novels. The critical background of Victorian literature and the Condition of England novel has been completed by research about the single writers and their contributions to the subgenre.

After having examined the literary sources for Brexit novels and Condition of England novels separately, it has been necessary to establish a critical framework combining these two subgenres to support the hypothesis of a comparison between them. The study of contemporary literature has presented different difficulties and has required considering a polyhedric set of critical perspectives. Therefore, to study Brexit novels within a broader literary tradition, it becomes essential to clarify methodological challenges and solutions. The next section discusses the variety of sources employed to substantiate the initial research hypothesis, as well as the methodology and critical approach adopted.

I.3 Methodology and Critical Approach

The number of comments, analyses, and studies about Brexit demonstrates a strong concern for understanding this unprecedented event, which seems to have uncovered long-standing grievances and problems. The same buzzing interest was reflected in the literary production. As the writer Jonathan Coe claims: "So many novelists seem to feel an urgent need to address the present moment. Brexit has focused our minds." (Coe 2018). The urgency with which the Brexit referendum has appeared in novels shows the deep emotional impact of this political crisis. However, "The potential downside is that, in the rush to engage with the contemporary, we lose perspective." (Coe 2018). An event that is so close, both temporally and emotionally, is difficult to represent. Therefore, it is crucial to recognise how reality is represented in Brexit novels. These literary works rely on both realistic and imaginative approaches to contemporaneity. The use of narrative strategies such as the setting in past or future eras (historicisation or dystopia) can create a sense of detachment from the subject of the story, allowing the reader to view it from a different perspective. Thus, a comprehensive understanding of the narrative approaches adopted in the novels is central to addressing the thematic and pragmatic functions of the subgenre.

The difficulty in adopting an objective perspective on the present moment involves both novelists and critics and represents the challenge of this kind of study. Engaging with a literary phenomenon that is still in progress and cannot be framed in its entirety undoubtedly entails methodological difficulties. Studying contemporaneity while immersed in it can be demanding, but understanding its complexity is also necessary. Every analysis of the present is inevitably provisional. For this reason, every generalisation about contemporary culture must have its origin and justification in the past and in the cultural paradigms that precede it (Mussgnug 2014, 1). This thesis moves from Raffaele Donnarumma's study of contemporary literature to analyse the emergence of a new subgenre by exploring its roots within the literary tradition. For understanding contemporaneity, literary history provides a suitable tool because it creates a necessary distance between the research object and the critic (see Donnarumma 2014, last chapter). The goal is to establish a connection between the past and the present and contextualise the latter. The Brexit event and its literary outcome need to be studied both in their topicality and in their relation to the past. This

dissertation aims to identify a contemporary literary phenomenon by placing it within the tradition of the English social novel, framing the contemporary subgenre in patterns that are not new. The purpose is to pinpoint which features derive from the social novel tradition and which elements are, instead, specific to the subgenre of the Brexit novel. In this way, it is possible to delimit the Brexit novel's ideological, formal, and narrative elements. This thesis follows this methodological approach when dealing with the corpus of novels. The application of this method is expressed in the comparison between the Brexit novel and the Condition of England novel and in the attribution of the former to the long-standing tradition of the social novel in English literature. The comparison is articulated through close readings and textual analysis, with a particular focus on the central themes of the novels.

Another difficulty in analysing a contemporary phenomenon is recognising and engaging with a plurality of themes. Brexit novels present a number of intersecting topics, raising different questions and appealing to a variety of ideas. The complexity of the contemporary requires the exploration of several critical perspectives so as to gain a more complete understanding. For this reason, the critical framework of this thesis is composite, and it includes various inputs. The primary source is Cultural Studies, particularly the work of Raymond Williams, which constitutes the foundation of the thesis. Postcolonial studies have also been part of the critical background, especially in reference to the question of Otherness. Additionally, the research around questions of national identity and the history of the English nation has been fundamental in tracing the features of English nationalism and Englishness. Lastly, it is worth mentioning Trauma Studies and Ecocriticism as valuable perspectives in the reading of Brexit novels, even if their epistemological paradigms have not been explored in depth. The classic works by Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History* (1996) and Laurie Vickroy's *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (2002), have contributed to outlining the representation of traumatic experiences in the novels (for example, in Sarah Moss's *Ghost Wall* and Melissa Harrison's *All Among the Barley*). Similarly, given that the social anxiety caused by Brexit and represented in the novels is inevitably linked to a more general eco-anxiety (very visible, for instance, in John Lanchester's *The Wall*), the reading of *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996), edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, completed the critical overview of the thesis. All these contributions from different critical perspectives converge in creating a representation

of the complexity of the present as depicted in contemporary literature, especially in a subgenre like the Brexit novel, which directly engages with the various social and cultural issues of nowadays Britain.

This critical framework serves as a structure on which to build the hypothesis of the comparison between Condition of England novels and Brexit novels. The two subgenres are primarily associated with the fact that both are literary responses to a period of crisis, answering the need to engage with contemporary social and political circumstances. For this reason, Cultural Studies offer a unique lens through which we can interpret these subgenres. From a Cultural Studies perspective, literary works can be read as a body of different and polymorphic languages. These languages reveal the underlying anxieties and conflicts prevalent throughout a particular era. Literature becomes a platform to express ideological differences and capture the prevailing feelings of the time. In this thesis, Brexit and Condition of England novels are interpreted as cultural products emerging from a specific historical moment. They are an emotional response to an era of social changes and identity crisis, capturing and expressing the core tensions of their times.

Furthermore, the Cultural Studies' reappropriation of Antonio Gramsci's ideas is recovered in this thesis. The concept of "organic intellectual"[17], central to Gramsci's thought, offers an interesting perspective on the role and aim of the social novel in general and Condition of England novels and Brexit novels in particular. As previously argued, both subgenres propose the perspective of a cultural elite, which is associated with the bourgeois class. This raises questions about the authors' responsibility for the social changes they advocate in their novels. It is of interest to understand if, using Gramsci's terms, they can be considered "organic intellectuals" at the service of the social forces which can change the status quo or if, on the contrary, Brexit novels and Condition of England novels are the expressions of the dominant culture and classes. The contribution of Cultural Studies is pivotal in grasping the dialectic between literature and society and, in particular, the role that literary products fulfil in the social world.

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[17] Gramsci divides intellectuals into two categories: "traditional" intellectuals, whose position is based on existing class relations and who hide their support for historical class divisions and dominant culture, and "organic" intellectuals, who are an integral part of a particular social class. These organic intellectuals are not defined by their profession but rather by their role in shaping the ideas and aspirations of the class to which they organically belong. See Antonio Gramsci's "The Intellectuals" in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Translated and Edited by Q. Hoare and G. N. Smith, 1971, pp. 3-23.

In connection with Cultural Studies, the primary reference source is Raymond Williams. His seminal works, which posed the basis for the cultural approach to literature, have been fundamental for this dissertation. They include *Culture and Society* (1960), *The Country and the City* (1973), *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976), and *Marxism and Literature* (1977). In particular, this thesis relies on the concept of "structure of feeling", which is central in Williams' work. The structure of feeling relates to a set of social experiences, thoughts, and feelings which have not been articulated and are impossible to comprehend fully: "It is a kind of feeling and thinking which is indeed social and material, but each in an embryonic phase before it can become fully articulate and defined exchange." (Williams 1977, 128). Therefore, the structure of feeling "can be defined as social experiences in solution", not yet formed or "precipitated" and, consequently, not detectable in dominant forms of art but only in emergent ones (Williams 1977, 134). For Williams, literature registers the advent of new structures of feeling before the transformation in society is complete and visible, being the receptor of the change happening in their contemporaneity. In this thesis, Brexit novels and Condition of England novels are analysed as literary responses to the development of new structures of feeling, subscribing to Williams' definition of the term. Both subgenres register the social changes and represent the emergence of new ways of living, thinking, and feeling, becoming the perfect medium to investigate a moment of crisis.

Moreover, Williams' examination of representations of country and city in English literature (analysed in *The Country and the City*) is relevant to this thesis in exploring the long-standing politics of place linked to England's divided geography.[18] In Williams' work, the depiction of the national divide is epitomised in the images of the country and the city, which have been structural to English literary tradition, especially in moments of significant social changes (Williams 1973, 291). These symbols reflect the importance of the rural and urban imagery connected to a traditional idea of English national identity. Williams connects the persistent representation of the country and the city in English literature to the fact that England was the first country to witness the rise of industrialism (and, consequently, of

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[18] Several authors have recently engaged with the study of the spatial dimension of literature, such as Franco Moretti, Bertrand Westphal, and Karl Schlögel. Franco Moretti argues that there is a strict connection between the geography of a novel and its content and that "in the modern novel, what happens depends strictly on where it happens" (Moretti 1997, 74, my translation).

capitalism). The idyllic image of the countryside and the city's progressive ways of life are the products of the fast-paced changes that have affected English society since the seventeenth century. The regional and cultural divisions depicted in English literature overlap with the "two nations" of the rich and the poor, a central trope in Condition of England novels. Williams argues that the traditional dichotomy between the country and the city, considered isolated entities, fails to acknowledge their interdependence and mutual support. The study of the national divisions, expressed through the symbolic spaces of the country and the city, is central to this thesis' engagement with the same theme in Brexit novels. Brexit novels represent, through imaginative narration, the possibility of healing the national fracture and creating a cohesive community which overcomes these traditional divisions.

Raymond Williams' influence is not limited to the identification of the dichotomic nature of England's national identity. In the two final chapters of *The Country and the City*, the author argues that the system of imperialism is an expansion of the same dialectic between the country and the city. The relationship between imperial power and colonies can be compared to the relationship between the city and the countryside. The city represents the centre of power and decision-making, while the countryside is the periphery, subject to the city's laws and regulations (Williams 1973, chapters 24-25). The translation of the logic of exploitation that first concerned the English countryside and then moved to far lands abroad contributed, as well, to the creation of the English pastoral myths. The English rural areas became a place of retreat and peace, as opposed to both the chaotic city and the remote, exotic, colonial environment.

All these ideas have been essential to the development of this thesis, as they unite the theme of national division, the idealisation of the rural space, and the persistence of imperial logic behind the peculiar elements which constitute the English nation. These themes emerge strongly in Brexit novels and are assessed in the thesis through textual analysis. The topic of the Empire, pivotal in the Brexit discourse, has been examined through a postcolonial perspective, analysing contributions such as Homi Bhabha's *Nation and Narration* (1990), *The Location of Culture* (1994), Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1979), and Paul Gilroy's *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (2004). These texts have also been fundamental in engaging with the theme of immigration and the representation of the foreign Other in literature. Said and Bhabha's seminal works identify the root of racial Othering in the Western belief that

the East is the Other and, therefore, inferior. The imperial discourse categorises the Self and the Other in terms of "good" and "evil". The coloniser benefits from the supposed primacy of its culture and worldview, while the colonised Other is marginalised. In postcolonial theory, the colonised Other is identified by its difference from the centre and position as the subject of power. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha argues that: "The objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonised as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction" (Bhabha 1994, 70). As a result, the foreign Other is marked by a negative connotation, suggesting their inferiority and the need for governance. However, Othering refers to a range of processes and discourses which create marginalisation and inequality based not only on race but also on group identities like religion, gender, class, and disabilities. For this reason, in this thesis, the term "Other" is borrowed from postcolonial theory to indicate the racialised and foreign Other but also further processes of Otherisation, which are directed towards different marginalised categories. In Brexit novels, the representation of systems of Otherisation includes the foreign Other but also the poor Other and the gendered Other.

The marginalisation of Otherised subjects connects with the depiction of the internal conflicts that characterise the English nation. The focus on England as the centre and the point of departure of all the discourses surrounding Brexit is a significant theme in this thesis. In the present study, the comparison between Condition of England novels and Brexit novels converges in the representation of English national identity and Englishness. In fact, all the themes that the two subgenres share (and which were central, as well, in the Brexit debate) relate to the ongoing English identity crisis. The engagement of the two subgenres with the contemporary state of the nation entails an analysis of national identity and its forms of expression. The evasive characteristics of English national identity have been the focus of different studies, such as Krishan Kumar's *The Making of English National Identity* (2003) and *The Idea of Englishness: English Culture, National Identity and Social Thought* (2015), in which the author argues for the special status of English nationalism and tries to define its history. Other works, like Arthur Aughey's *The Politics of Englishness* (2007), Linda Colley's *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (1992), Brian Doyle's *English and Englishness* (1989), and Simon Featherstone's *Englishness: Twentieth -Century Popular Culture and the Forming of English Identity*

(2009), have been valuable in tracing the complicated profile of English national identity. The study of English nationalism has been accompanied by the analysis of the role of literature in the national discourse. Authors such as Michael Gardiner and Patrick Parrinder argue that English literature is the main means of creating and expressing English national identity. This concept is pivotal in this dissertation, where the representation of the nation through narration becomes a way of reimagining the national community in times of crisis and is a prominent feature of Condition of England novels and Brexit novels.

To conclude, this thesis employs a multifaceted critical framework which comprises various perspectives. This approach ensures that all aspects of the central hypothesis are explored and analysed thoroughly. By utilising a composite approach, the thesis aims to provide an overview of the two subgenres analysed. Condition of England novels and Brexit novels are then compared through textual analysis. Grounding the close readings on a solid yet variegated critical framework allows for a deep understanding of the themes expressed in the novels. The subsequent section outlines the thesis structure and the corpus of novels in more detail.

I.4 Thesis Structure and Selected Corpus

In terms of structure, this study moves from the general (theoretical framework, cultural and literary background) to the specific (analytic readings of primary texts). The process of developing a critical hypothesis requires extensive research and analysis. The study begins with a thorough exploration of previous critical studies. The critical framework and the existing literature on the topic serve as the foundation for the following analysis of the corpus of novels. The novels are subsequently contextualised with attention to the political, social, and cultural background. Afterwards, the features and characteristics of the two subgenres are identified, focusing on common themes and styles. Throughout this research, the exploration of the central themes of the novels is carried out through close readings and in-depth textual analysis. This provides a comprehensive understanding of the new subgenre of the Brexit novel and its significance in the contemporary literary landscape.

The first two chapters define the terms upon which the central critical hypothesis can be constructed and delineate a background for analysing each specific text. Chapter One, "Beyond Fiction: Navigating the Social Landscape in Condition of

England Novels", starts with an overview of the social and political context of the Early Victorian period. The analysis of the philosophical and political thought of the time serves as an introduction to the presentation of the literary subgenre of the Condition of England novel. The chapter then focuses on the main features of the subgenre, the themes, and the stylistic choices. The second part of the chapter provides insights into the selected corpus of novels, presenting the authors and their approach to the Condition of England question. My discussion respectively covers Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil, or The Two Nations* (1845), Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1849), Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1854), and Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854). This introduction is important to determine the choice of the corpus and its possible connection with Brexit novels.

Chapter Two, "From Brexit to Brexit Novels: Narrative Responses to the Political Turmoil", opens with a panoramic view of the Brexit event, its causes, and its social and political consequences. One of the most interesting products of the Brexit crisis is the literary subgenre of the Brexit novel. The chapter analyses the emergence of this group of novels that deals with the contemporary historical moment, engaging with the main interrogations raised by the Brexit referendum. The range of Brexit novels under discussion in this thesis includes the "seasonal cycle" by Ali Smith (*Autumn* (2016), *Winter* (2017), *Spring* (2019) and *Summer* (2020)), Amanda Craig's *The Lie of the Land* (2017), Anthony Cartwright's *The Cut* (2017), Sam Byers' *Perfidious Albion* (2018), Melissa Harrison's *All Among the Barley* (2018), Sarah Moss's *Ghost Wall* (2018), Jonathan Coe's *Middle England* (2018), , John Lanchester's *The Wall* (2019), and Niall Griffiths' *Broken Ghost* (2019). The number of novels categorised as Brexit novels is still rising, so it is important to define a limited corpus of novels, giving reason for their choice and introducing their thematic and stylistic features.

Chapter Three, "From Social Change to Narration: Intersecting Themes in Brexit and Condition of England Novels", opens the analytic section of the thesis. After introducing the two subgenres of the Condition of England novel and the Brexit novel, this chapter examines and compares their common themes. Through textual references and comprehensive analysis of the novels, the focus of the chapter moves from one theme to the other to explore parallels between the two subgenres. The thematic and stylistic evaluation allows the identification of common patterns, which

reveal how these authors creatively responded to the challenges of a moment of social and political crisis.

Finally, Chapter Four, "Unravelling English National Identity in Narration", connects the themes previously analysed to the underlying question of English national identity. The engagement of literary production in the representation of the English nation is an established idea. Both Condition of England novels and Brexit novels offer a specific example of the role of literature in participating in the English national discourse and proposing a counter-narrative to dominant representations of the national community. In fact, not only do the two subgenres portray the present state of the nation but aim to re-imagine it through imaginative narration, crafting new ways of thinking and being in a moment of identity crisis. The chapter outlines the representations of Englishness and English national identity in the two subgenres. Ultimately, this thesis retraces the common themes and features of the two subgenres to demonstrate the initial hypothesis.

CHAPTER 1

Beyond Fiction: Navigating the Social Landscape in Condition of England Novels

> 'And thence arose that intercourse,
> which though it might not have the effect
> of preventing all future clash of opinion and action,
> when the occasion arose, would, at any rate,
> enable both master and man to look upon each other
> with far more charity and sympathy,
> and bear with each other more patiently and kindly.'
> (Gaskell 1854, 418)

1.1 A Nation in Turmoil: Historical and Political Context of Early Victorian England

The two subgenres under analysis share a similar social and political background. Condition of England novels and Brexit novels are part of the cultural response to a time of social upheaval, capturing and expressing the central tensions of their times. The significant social changes that occurred during each period, the economic turmoil, and widespread discontent engendered writers' desire to try to understand, through narration, their contemporaneity. The widely held perception that the nation was in crisis pushed intellectuals and artists to step forward and advocate for new forms of national belonging and social solidarity. Both subgenres engage with social and political issues. For this reason, it is essential to set out the historical background from which they emerged. This chapter analyses the social context of the Early Victorian age and explores the significance of the Condition of England novel as a tool for investigating, representing, and responding to its time. This assessment is essential to recognise the similarities between the Early Victorian period and the Brexit moment. Moreover, the comparison between the two historical contexts is functional in identifying the contemporary literary responses to the Brexit crisis.

The Condition of England novel appeared in the Early Victorian age, a period characterised by fast social and economic changes. The advent of the industrial society, the swift modifications in the country's demography, and the development of new social classes were complemented by new ways of thinking about the world. It is crucial to investigate these beliefs to understand the episteme in which the Condition of England writers were operating. New ideas such as liberalism, political economy, and Utilitarianism, which focused on the economic value of the individual and Anglicanism and Evangelicalism, which focused on the moral one, were central in influencing the literary production of the time. Condition of England authors promoted philanthropy and more empathetic class relations, shocked by the social crisis and inspired by the moral values of Evangelicalism. Therefore, it is pivotal to look at the main political, philosophical, and social changes of the Early Victorian period in order to fully grasp the Condition of England novel as a product of its time.

In 1837, Victoria became the new Queen of the United Kingdom. Her reign lasted until 1901, and during these 70 years, Great Britain went through significant social and political changes. Historians usually label this period the "Victorian age", also including the short reign of William IV that started in 1830. The Victorian Age is traditionally divided into three different periods: Early Victorian (1830-1850), Mid-Victorian (1850-1870), and Late Victorian (1870-1901).[19] During these years, Great Britain enjoyed a period of relative stability, economic prosperity, and commercial and colonial expansion. The Victorian age also saw the establishment of industrial society and the emergence of important social problems concerning the exploitation of workers, poverty, overcrowded cities, and unhealthy environments. Industrialisation and urbanisation accelerated during the nineteenth century, with major shifts in occupation patterns. New social classes, ideologies, and forms of politics and government developed during this time (Kidd 1998, 4). This thesis considers, specifically, the Early Victorian age, that period between the 1830s and 1850s that differs from the previous and the following ones because of internal political troubles and frequent clashes between capital and labour (Cazamian 1973, 2). The Condition of England genre emerged in this period as a reaction to the rapidity of social and

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[19] I follow Louis Cazamian's time division. I agree with the author that the start/ending dates of the three periods are a choice of convenience; the borders between the three moments in the Victorian age are blurred. The early Victorian period, in fact, ended between 1846 and 1855, between the end of Chartism and the Crimean War. See Cazamian, *The Social Novel in England, 1830-1850: Dickens, Disraeli, Mrs Gaskell, Kingsley*, 1973, "Introduction".

economic change. The subgenre represented the cultural response to a moment of deep turmoil and reflected the shared feeling of a national crisis.

The great advancement of industrialisation at the beginning of the nineteenth century had many consequences on British society. The urban population growth was unprecedented: the 1851 census showed the point at which, for the first time, more people lived in cities than in the countryside.[20] This was linked to a substantial rise in the number of people employed in factories, which caused a gradual shift in the British economy from agricultural to industrial.[21] Many philosophers studied and analysed these fast changes. They wanted to understand how to deal with the profound implications of the new industrial society and how the state must respond to it. Adam Smith formulated the most influential theories in what has come to be known as "political economy".[22] One of the main beliefs of political economy was that the state must apply a *laissez-faire* policy and should not interfere in the economy. Individual initiative was considered the most crucial factor: the individual should be free to act following his self-interest in a liberal economy, and the market self-regulates in accordance. This theory was further elaborated in 1789 by Jeremy Bentham in his *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. Bentham proposed a "utilitarian" idea of society based on a rational analysis of human nature. Individuals act to achieve "the greatest pleasure for the greatest number" (Bentham 1789, 65); every action is valued based on its utility to the bigger number of people. Bentham's Utilitarianism greatly influenced governmental response to social problems. Statistical institutions – such as the Statistical Society of London, funded in 1834 – were created to investigate the state of the nation, and voluminous reports gathered in the so-called Blue Books aimed to rationalise social phenomena (Adams 2009, 16-17). Another central premise of political economy regarded the study of population growth formulated by Thomas Malthus in *An Essay on the Principles of Population* (1798).

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[20] Between 1801 and 1891, the population in England and Wales rose from almost 8 million to nearly 30 million. The most significant growth occurred in urban areas, where the population increased from 3 million to 22 million. In rural areas, there was almost no growth in population (from 5 million to 7 million). See for reference Chris M. Law, "The Growth of Urban Population in England and Wales, 1801-1911." in *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, n. 41, 1967.

[21] "At the beginning of the century, approaching 40 per cent of families were involved in agriculture, and, although this had fallen to about one-third by 1831, farming remained the single largest occupational category for adult males in 1851. Yet by 1871, only 15 per cent of the working population were employed in agriculture, falling to a mere 7.6 per cent in 1911" (Kidd 1998, 9).

[22] Smith's most important work, in which he defined his theory, is *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, written in 1776.

He theorised that the population grows constantly, but the food supply grows more slowly. Therefore, for Malthus, it was impossible to prevent poverty and starvation of a part of the population. Malthus' theory was used to criticise the Poor Law and to justify the passing of the New Poor Law in 1834,[23] which diminished state financial help destined for the poor. Political economy theories were developed in the late eighteenth century but were widespread in Victorian times and profoundly influenced political action. John Stuart Mill, one of the greatest thinkers of the mid-nineteenth century, elaborated on political economy and utilitarian theories.[24] He enriched and complicated Utilitarianism, bringing it closer to humanitarianism and, eventually, socialism. Political economy and Utilitarian ideas expressed the belief that self-interest was the fundamental motivation for human action. Consequently, morality was set aside and could not influence any decision (both of the individual and the state). The only goal was increasing productivity and wealth, even at the cost of condemning a large part of the population to poverty and mistreatment (Marshall 2002, 40).

Poverty was, in fact, the condition in which a consistent part of the population was living.[25] Factory working conditions were appalling, and children and women laboured many hours for meagre wages. Even after various Factory Acts[26] (like the Ten Hours Act in 1847, which imposed a maximum of ten hours of work for children and women), there was only a slight improvement in the state of the workers and, most

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[23] Malthus's work also inspired the first national census in 1801 as a means to keep track of demographics and demographic change.

[24] His most influential works were *On Liberty* (1859), *Utilitarianism* (1863) and *Principles of Political Economy* (1871). At the beginning of his philosophical career, he was a follower of pure Utilitarianism. After the 1830s, he came into contact with what he called "Germano-Coleridgean" philosophy, an idealist and mystic ideology, which changed his perspective.

[25] Unfortunately, no statistics indicate a precise number of people living in poverty during this time (the first statistic would be published at the end of the 19th century). In 1849, around 12% of the population received poor relief from the state. However, these numbers are unreliable, as they only show who was using state welfare without considering private welfare and philanthropy. Moreover, they do not measure the number of people living in poverty (see Kidd 1998, 10-11-12).

[26] "The Factory Acts of 1833, 1844, and 1847 placed restrictions upon the employment of women and children in most textile enterprises, that of 1842 did the same for mines. The introduction of the new Poor Law in 1834 and the reorganization of its central machinery in 1847 injected an element of centralization where none had existed before. The Metropolitan Police Force was established in 1829; in 1835 boroughs were required to set up forces; in 1839 counties were permitted (though not compelled) to do the same. Education grants were made to voluntary societies from 1833 onwards and a system of inspection was set up in 1839 as part of that general move towards the establishment of minimum conditions to which the setting-up of factory (1833), mines (1842), and prisons (1835) inspectorates also belonged. Voluntary provision for smallpox vaccination was made in 1840 and a Public Health Act passed in 1848 which, though it possessed some sharp teeth, proved a disappointment to those most anxious to extend the state's central responsibilities. Much of this was important more for the way in which it marked a symbolic acceptance of change than for the impact – often rather limp – of the measures themselves." (Hoppen 1998, 97).

of the time, the new rules were not implemented by employers (Brantlinger and Thesing 2002, 338). The passing of the New Poor Law in 1834 reduced social welfare and imposed strict parameters to access relief. Working-class radicals saw the Law as a further act of violence towards the labourers, contributing to the need for the creation of Chartism (Kidd 1998, 30). The Chartist movement was a working-class mobilisation which was launched in 1838 with the publication of "The People's Charter", a document that asked for political reform and the extension of the franchise to all male adults. In fact, even after the Great Reform Act of 1832 – a fundamental step towards the enlargement of the right to vote – more than eighty per cent of male citizens (and all the women) were left without a vote. The power still resided in the hands of the landed gentry, also excluding a big part of the middle class. In 1839,1842, and 1848, Chartists submitted three large petitions to the Parliament to implement the reforms contained in the Charter. All of them were rejected, and after the last extensive agitation in 1848, the movement lost its mass support and soon collapsed. Despite its failure, Chartism contributed to the working class's political education, representing a first step in the formation of a class conscience and a model for future movements (Hoppen 1998, 131).

During the Victorian era, the middle class became increasingly prominent. The middle class was a large and varied group, from the wealthiest bankers and entrepreneurs to modest shopkeepers and clerks. They were identified by their separation from the manual workers (industrial and rural) and the aristocracy and landowners (Hoppen 1998, 31-32). It was an urban class that lived mainly in London.[27] Theodore Hoppen argues that the middle class was also characterised by anxiety about income, economic success, and status (Hoppen 1998, 45-46). The importance given to money was counterbalanced by stress on certain "gentlemanly" qualities that became characteristic of the Victorian middle-class members: respectability, moral earnestness, discipline, and a strong sense of familial and domestic duty. All these values were also reflected in the cultural production of the time, particularly in the novels written by members of the middle class, as the ones analysed in this thesis.

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[27] Over a third of middle-class taxpayers (mainly clerks and professionals) resided in London in 1859-60. By contrast, the northern industrial towns counted a low proportion (in some cases less than one-tenth) of middle-class representatives because the money was concentrated in a few hands. See Theodore K. Hoppen, *The Mid-Victorian Generation: 1846-1886*, 1998, Chapter 2.

A widespread dissenting branch of Protestantism, Evangelicalism also influenced middle-class culture. As Alan Kidd maintains:

> The influence of Evangelicalism was pervasive. It provided the nineteenth century with both its particular blend of Christian values and its general atmosphere of sober respectability and moral earnestness. It made religion central to middle-class culture and, from that base, infiltrated the mentality of many in both the working classes and the aristocracy. It is central to an understanding of voluntary approaches to the problem of poverty. (Kidd 1998, 71)

Evangelicals considerably inspired Victorian culture – and Victorian novelists – condemning temptation and desire and professing moral probity and austerity. They also had a significant role in the social activism of Victorian times through their open profession of Christian piety and charity. For instance, they were fundamental in pushing for the Abolition of Slavery in 1833. Evangelicals believed in the possibility of redemption, which could be achieved through moral education. Moral and religious education was also considered fundamental to helping the poor and elevating their social condition and was, therefore, a constitutive part of evangelical philanthropy. Philanthropy became a central tenet of Christian sensitivity in the Victorian middle classes, and women played a particularly prominent role in many charities and other philanthropic endeavours. Also, it was regarded as a preferential way of giving relief because of its focus on the individual and its ability to provide not only economic but also moral and religious support to the distressed (Kidd 1998, 76). The significance of philanthropy is also visible in literature, especially in subgenres like Condition of England novels, which seek practical solutions to ease social issues.

Even if superficially different, both Evangelicalism and Utilitarianism stressed the importance of the individual. Abiding by the theories of political economy, Utilitarians believed that each person acts in self-interest. Society is a sum of individuals and the result of singular actions. In the same way, Evangelicals emphasised the personal relationship with God and the person's fulfilment through redemption. As Josephine Guy argues, Victorians were acting in an individualistic episteme. The social problems were seen to have individual causes, and the solutions to these could be obtained through the change of individual actions and beliefs rather than social structures (Guy 1996, 73). This is central to understanding the cultural

response to poverty and other social issues during the Victorian age. The individualism inherent in Victorian society influenced Condition of England writers, who applied the same frame of mind in their narratives. The early Victorian period was characterised by the emergence of new social problems which were calling for new solutions. The Condition of England novels written by middle-class members[28] responded to poverty issues, stressing the importance of individual initiative through philanthropy, moral education, and fierce opposition to social revolution. For the middle class, the only way to solve social conflict and avoid class violence and protests was to resort to the Christian feelings of piety and compassion. This idea was widely based on the evangelical principles of philanthropy and moral education. Working-class people, instead, organised protest movements, such as Chartism, which threatened the establishment and stimulated a fear of revolution.[29] This social movement challenged middle-class individualism and was inspired by socialism and anarchism.[30] On the contrary, the government was taking a position of withdrawal, following the *laissez-faire* ideas of political economy, and scarcely intervening to regulate the job market. Still, the social pressure, through protests, petitions, and intellectual movements, pushed many reforms to be passed during the Early Victorian years.

After 1848, some of the social problems that characterised the early years of Victoria's reign seemed to disappear due to the flourishing of the economy, which increased wealth and improved living conditions for many. The Mid-Victorian period was one of the moments of major fortune for Great Britain. The Empire[31] was at its maximum expansion, and the British economy and political power were vast and uncontested. A sense of optimism pervaded all strata of society, partially silencing the social unrest of the previous years and signalling a shift in the cultural attitude. This

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[28] In this thesis, I selected exclusively Condition of England novels written by middle-class authors. Even so, it is worth pointing out that there is a corpus of Condition of England novels written by working-class writers and members of the Chartist movement. See, for reference, Ian Haywood (ed.), *The Literature of Struggle: An Anthology of Chartist Fiction*, 2016, and Martha Vicinus, "Chartist Fiction and the Development of a Class-Based Literature". in *The Socialist Novel in Britain: Towards the Recovery of a Tradition*, ed. by H. Gustav Laus, 1982.

[29] The French Revolution of 1789 was still a fresh and terrifying memory in the mind of the British.

[30] Although Chartism was the most widespread movement of the period, it is worth mentioning other social protests, such as the Luddites and the Captain Swing Riots, which spurred a sense of class consciousness and struggle.

[31] Even if the Empire was a central economic asset in the Early Victorian days, the narratives involving the Empire were mostly absent in those years. The Empire only appears tangentially, through the mention of exotic products or as a place of import and export; its presence is a given that is not problematised.

implicated a change of narratives, concluding an age of meditation over social problems that had been the staple of the Early Victorian intellectual life.

In fact, sensibility and attention towards society and social problems characterised the Early Victorian period. As Louis Cazamian argues, the concepts of social responsibility and interventionism came to the fore between the 1830s and 1850s (Cazamian 1973, 3). This echoed in literature, where the writing of novels expressed middle-class sensibility towards the poor. The assessment of the significance of political economy, Evangelicalism, and reformistic impulse is fundamental to understanding how these writers related to their contemporaneity. Writers narrated the present moment, pondering its significance and meaning. Their purpose was also to educate their fellow middle-class members, to bring awareness about the condition of the poor and to push for social reform. The same aim is detectable in the new subgenre of the Brexit novel, which considers the Brexit event and its ramifications in order to urge a redefinition of the idea of national community. The historical background is essential to frame these two subgenres and their depiction of the social and political context in the narrative form. Social issues are the main subject of narration, as analysed in the subsequent section, which engages with the thematic, formal, and ideological features of the Condition of England novel.

1.2 Writing the State of the Nation through the Condition of England Novel

During the mid-19th century, a group of novels emerged that offered an insight into the social problems and issues of the Early Victorian era. These novels, collectively known as "Condition of England novels" (also as "industrial," "social," or "social problem" novels), were written between 1845 and 1855 and sought to explore the complex and often turbulent social landscape of the time. The subgenre of the Condition of England novel is uniform in both themes and style. Through realistic descriptions, melodramatic scenes and the deployment of Christian morality, these novels provide a powerful commentary on the state of Victorian society. The main focus of these novels is the unhealthy conditions in which the working class is forced to live and work and the unfair wealth gap between the rich and the poor. Other themes often explored in Condition of England novels are the division between the country and the city, the role of women in Victorian society, a nostalgic idea of the past, the confrontation with the Other (that can be represented through the encounter with the working class, women or the foreign Other, specifically Irish). Through the analysis

of these themes, it is possible to draw a connection with the contemporary subgenre of the Brexit novels and explore how the two subgenres confront similar topics in two different historical contexts. Therefore, the study of the origin, the themes, and the style of Condition of England novels is necessary to introduce the comparison between the two subgenres.

The tradition of the Condition of England novel took its first moves from the industrial novels written in the 1830s, which considered the exploitation of children in factories. Frances Trollope's *The Life and Adventures of Michael Armstrong, The Factory Boy* (1839)[32] can be regarded as the main example of this literary trend that later developed into the Condition of England novel. The mixture of veracity and melodrama was already detectable in these works, even if the plot and characterisation were feeble and often entailed a simple contrast between good and evil (Brantlinger and Thesing 2002, 345). Nonetheless, the great success of *Michael Armstrong* and Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna's *Helen Fleetwood* (1841) (a novel about the exploitation of working-class women) drew attention to the factory question and stimulated the interest of the intellectual world. During the following years, many novelists began to address the industrial question in their novels. In contrast to earlier examples of the subgenre, which primarily focused on working children, around the 1840s, the attention began to shift towards adult characters and more mature themes. These themes included issues related to class conflict and the Chartist agitations. This marked a significant departure from the earlier examples of industrial novels. Condition of England novels were more complex, as they aimed to portray and understand the present state of the nation in all its aspects (Brantlinger and Thesing 2002, 344).

The term "Condition of England" derives from a famous expression of the philosopher Thomas Carlyle, who greatly influenced social problem novelists. He used the phrase in *Chartism* (1839) to criticise the situation of the working classes and call for remedies. Carlyle sympathised with the plight of the working classes but also condemned the violence of Chartist protests, which he feared would lead to a revolution. Social reform was necessary to ameliorate the poor's condition and sedate Chartism. Carlyle contested the laissez-faire policies of political economy and the

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[32] In writing her novel, Trollope drew heavily on the *Memoir of Robert Blincoe*, an autobiographical account of a factory child. The account represented the abuses and violence within the factories for the first time in literature. It had an incredible success, and it helped the propaganda for the Ten Hours Bill. The use of this source credited Trollope's fiction as highly credible in the eyes of the readers who already knew Blincoe's story.

rationality of Utilitarianism, and he criticised the "mechanical society", which provoked the degradation of the urban working class (see Carlyle 1829).[33] At the same time, he opposed collectivism and his proposal for social reform was based on the leadership of a rejuvenated aristocracy (Cazamian 1973, 4). Moreover, Carlyle believed in the centrality of literature as a means to spread moral education: "Literature too, if we consider it, gives similar testimony. At no former era has Literature, the printed communication of Thought, been of such importance as it is now. […] The true Church of England, at this moment, lies in the Editors of its Newspapers."[34] (Carlyle 2000, 289). Carlyle's social writings influenced many contemporary novelists. His condemnation of the awful condition of the working class and his demand for reform reverberate in the Condition of England novels. For instance, Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil or the Two Nations* draws inspiration from Carlyle's idea of the emergence of a hero from the aristocracy who must protect the people (Adams 2009, 91). Similarly, Charles Dickens dedicated *Hard Times*, his only Condition of England novel, to Thomas Carlyle. Dickens' final exhortation to the reader to take action for the betterment of the country is directly influenced by Carlyle's philosophy (Dunn 1971, 91).

Condition of England novels portrayed the contemporary social situation, shedding light on the struggles and hardships faced by the working class. Through their narrative, these novels highlighted the stark divisions between the rich and the poor in Victorian society. They served as a commentary on the inequalities and injustices prevalent in their time and contributed vastly to the social debate:

As the appetite for knowledge about the condition of England was whetted, novelists found an audience interested in learning more about the plight of the

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[33] Carlyle denounces the heartlessness of the present society and the disinterest towards the spiritual condition of the people, which are only considered as gears in the state machine: "It is no longer the moral, religious, spiritual condition of the people that is our concern, but their physical, practical, economic condition, as regulated by public laws. Thus is the Body-politic more than ever worshipped and tendered; but the Soul-politic less than ever. Love of country, in any high or generous sense, in any other than an almost animal sense, or mere habit, has little importance attached to it in such reforms, or in the opposition shown them. Men are to be guided only by their self-interests. Good government is a good balancing of these; and, except a keen eye and appetite for self-interest, requires no virtue in any quarter. To both parties it is emphatically a machine: to the discontented, a 'taxing-machine;' to the contented, a 'machine for securing property.' Its duties and its faults are not those of a father, but of an active parish-constable." (Carlyle 2000, 278).

[34] Carlyle refers to newspapers when he talks about literature because, at the time, novels and other forms of creative writing were all published in newspapers in periodic instalments before being edited as volumes.

working classes, and the novel became a method of teaching the middle and upper

classes about the "real" condition of England. Reform was on the minds of all of

England, and the novel was the apparatus by which many matters of concern

would be presented to the public in a manner and language not suited only for

lawyers and politicians, but for the common man and woman as well.

(Brantlinger and Thesing 2002, 336-337)

The authors aimed to bring awareness to the upper classes about the condition of the most disadvantaged people and push for social reform. They sought to educate and change their readers' opinions, evoking a compassionate response to the crude reality depicted in the novels. Therefore, the novel assumed a central role in influencing social and political life, speaking directly to the public about pressing social issues. Condition of England novels represented the complexity of the present through narration. A similar ambition can be detected nowadays in Brexit novels, which engage with social issues in a moment of profound change, showing an interest in political matters. The Brexit event unveiled unresolved identity questions and exposed the frail state of the nation, which appears profoundly divided. The comparison with the Victorian Condition of England novel is illuminating as it shows how literature's engagement in the social discourse emerges and becomes essential in a moment of crisis. In the early Victorian period, the swift modifications caused by the Industrial Revolution revealed the injustices of the class system and the deep social divisions which characterised the nation. Literature contributed to the discussion about the state of the country and the condition of the poor.

　　Condition of England novels not only portrayed contemporary English society but aimed at finding solutions to the most urgent social problems. The answers to the contemporary crisis put forth by the novelists gave prominence to individual action. The authors observed society through an individualistic frame of mind, highlighting the importance of personal responsibility and self-reliance. Philanthropy and personal commitment were seen as the main ways to bridge the gap between different classes. Even when they criticised political economy and Utilitarianism, Victorian novelists still applied an individualistic perspective on the proposed solutions and were not, in any way, proposing a change in the social structure (See Guy 1996). They viewed social phenomena as having individual causes and therefore believed that it was the action of individuals, fuelled by Christian sensitivity and compassionate feelings, that

could solve the present social crisis. The main purpose of Condition of England novels was to move the readers to sympathise with the poor and eventually undertake social action in their favour.[35] At the same time, novelists always condemned the protests perpetrated by Chartism and Trade Unions. The collective working-class movements were judged for their violent actions and for annihilating individual initiatives. Trade unionists and Chartist leaders were depicted in the novels as corrupted characters or as desperate people who lost their way and needed the guidance of the upper classes.

Various themes intertwine in the Condition of England novel subgenre. The clash between the rich and the poor and the possibility of their reconciliation is the main subject of Condition of England novels. The dualistic representation of society, divided between rich and poor, employee and employer, is distinctive of the subgenre. In Condition of England novels, for the first time, working-class characters are given a voice. These characters often oppose middle-class or aristocratic figures, developing the typical theme of "the two nations" in conflict. The detailed and realistic description of the working and living conditions of the lower strata of society is a novelty introduced by the subgenre. The writers wanted to shock the reader by showing the appalling situations in which the poor lived. Through vivid descriptions, they sought to expose the social and economic injustices that plagued society to raise awareness and provoke an empathetic reaction from the public. The Condition of England novel filled the gaps of representation left by more official political channels, giving space to the invisible poor (Marshall 2002, 19). However, the description of the working-class characters, undertaken by middle-class writers, often recurred to stereotypical images and clichés. The poor were either portrayed as the innocent victims of social injustice or as perpetrators of class brutality and other crimes. Even when violence was recognised as having a social reason, novelists always condemned the choice of resorting to it. Empathy, good sentiments, and class solidarity were seen as the only viable solutions to the injustices (and to avoid a revolution). The dichotomic image of the nation, divided between apparently irreconcilable sides, is also a typical feature in Brexit novels. The referendum configured Great Britain as a country split between Leavers and Remainers, nationalistic and cosmopolitan ideas, and highlighted the

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[35] This was effective to a limited extent and could prevent the reader from taking social action. In fact, the experience of sympathy or "cathartic sympathy" could displace and defer action. The reader felt morally satisfied for proving sympathy for the poor; therefore, he was not pushed to go further. See, for instance, Matthew Roberts, "Tory-Radical Feeling in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* and Early Victorian England", 2020, pp. 50-51, and James Eli Adams, *A History of Victorian Literature*, 2009, p. 59.

long-standing class divisions. Working-class characters appear in Brexit novels for the same purpose as in Condition of England novels. Writers aim to find a way to bridge the differences between the classes through personal relationships and mutual understanding.[36]

Therefore, these writers represent in the fictional world the possibility of social harmony. Working-class people in Condition of England novels often understand their errors and develop better relationships with their employers. Similarly, the corrupted manufacturers and heartless Utilitarians who initially cannot feel any piety towards the poor are converted to compassion and employ progressive policies in their factories. The path to the transformation of these characters is often favoured by more sensible upper-class individuals, represented by female characters such as Margaret in *North and South* or Caroline and Shirley in *Shirley*. The characterisation of women as mediators between the classes recurs in different Condition of England novels. Various authors thematise the ability of female characters to communicate with the different sides of the national divide and guide the other characters towards social reconciliation. As will be analysed later, female characters also become the key to reconciliation in Brexit novels. The presence of female protagonists in Brexit novels is relevant because, through their different perspectives, they envision more hospitable forms of belonging.

The divisions embedded in the nation, which are reflected in the form of the novel, are determined not only by class differences but also by geographical distance. The map of England has always been cut in pieces, between the industrial, impoverished north and the flourishing and agricultural south, and between the green countryside and the chaotic city. Literature has always reflected this division,[37] and the representation of England's divided geography emerges both in Condition of England novels and Brexit novels. The dualism of English politics of place is expressed in Condition of England novels, becoming another point of lamentation about the state of the nation (it is a central theme in *North and South* but is also important in *Sybil* and *Shirley*). Condition of England novels articulate the need to go beyond petty regional divisions and embrace a united national community. Novelists such as Elizabeth Gaskell advocated for improving both the working conditions in the

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[36] The way in which Brexit novels consider these themes is analysed in the following chapter.
[37] Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City* surveys the literary representation of England's split geography. This topic will be examined in a later chapter.

factories and the harsh lives of the farmers in the south of England. Social reform was needed to ameliorate the lives of the poor all over the country. Through narration, Condition of England writers promoted social charity and philanthropy on a national level (Cazamian 1973, 4), overcoming regional differences.

The image of the countryside in the English tradition has always been linked to a nostalgic idea of the past. The longing for a past that is deemed better than the present is a frequent refrain in Condition of England novels, as well as being a central rhetorical tool in the Brexit referendum campaign. Condition of England novels often compare a corrupted present – troubled by the impoverishment of the working class, the manufacturers' cruelty, and the government's ignorance – with an imagined past of genuine feelings, social responsibility, and national solidarity. Disraeli, in *Sybil or The Two Nations*, and Dickens, in *Hard Times*, propose a return to an "organic community"[38] free from the idiosyncrasies of the industrial society and the greed of political economy. On the contrary, this nostalgic view of the past is problematised and criticised in Brexit novels, as will be analysed in the last chapter.

The last theme that recurs both in Condition of England novels and Brexit novels is the confrontation with the Other, a term that can include the working class Other, women, or the foreign Other.[39] In particular, the topic of immigration and the negative depiction of the foreign Other is an underlying presence in several Condition of England novels. Immigrants, especially the Irish, are considered a threat to the English economy and are discriminated by the English characters. The English working class feared the arrival of the Irish workers who were deemed responsible for the low wages, as described in *North and South* and *Sybil*. Moreover, foreign manufacturers, such as Moore in *Shirley*, are harshly criticised for their aggressive entrepreneurial style and absence of attachment to the land. The xenophobic terms used in the novels to describe foreign characters recall the same used nowadays against immigrants. Similar expressions are repeated and criticised in Brexit novels. All these themes connect in the representation of the contemporary social and political situation. Condition of England novelists engage with different topics to depict society and its problems and try to navigate a moment of profound changes.

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[38] The "organic community" that these authors envision entails an honest and effortless collaboration between the classes. Employers are invested in the role of benevolent patrons and are committed to protecting and managing their employees, who, in turn, are grateful and respectful to their superiors.
[39] As I argue in the Introduction, the term "Other" is derived from postcolonial theory but applied to different categories subject to a process of Otherisation.

The analysis of the main themes articulated in the Condition of England subgenre must take into consideration the style of the novels. In fact, stylistic choices contribute to the way in which these novels' message is delivered and received. The style of Condition of England novels appears to be very consistent, presenting similar features and structures. The narration is realist in mode, with attention to historical and local contexts, but it also mixes elements of romance and melodrama.[40] These were, in fact, highly popular subgenres, so they were regarded as an appropriate medium to interpret the social problems afflicting society (Guy 1996, 119). The use of melodramatic devices (like tearful reconciliation scenes) can be seen as compromising the psychological depth of the characters and creating a preposterous plot. However, as Guy maintains, melodrama and romance are convenient to the purpose of Condition of England novels. Human action in melodrama is driven by morality, not economic interest. The choice to employ this subgenre was a way to replace the dominant economic discourse based on rationality and utility with one based on morals and humanity (Guy 1996, 119-120). Also, the emphasis on plot and action, typical of melodrama, was helpful in keeping the readers' attention in periodical publications. The serialised newspaper publication was the most common way to publish a novel. In fact, all Condition of England novels were published in periodical form during a time span of different weeks or months.[41] The realist stance in these novels was realised through detailed descriptions of working-class life. For the first time in literature, novels entered the poorest neighbourhood and described the humblest houses. The unsanitary, dirty dwellings of the poor are meticulously depicted, giving an account of the condition of the working class in the crowded industrial cities. The authors' attention to detail in portraying the poor environments added authenticity to the stories, immersing the readers in the gritty reality of the world they represented. The aim was to shock the public with testimonies of the condition of the poor in England. These accounts were based on personal experience, as in the case of Gaskell,

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[40] As Guido Mazzoni argues in his analysis of the "nineteenth-century paradigm", melodrama and romance were central to representing everyday life in the novel. Melodramatic elements emphasised the universal quality of private events, charging them with intensity and drama. Novels were also infused with the adventurous expedients typical of romance: extraordinary events disrupting the quiet life of ordinary people. See Mazzoni, *Theory of the Novel*, translated by Zakyia Hanafi, 2017.

[41] The book in the three-volume format (which was dominant for most of the century) was economically accessible only to a few readers, while through periodization, novels could reach a larger public. The first novelist to exploit the potential of serialized publishing was Charles Dickens. For a rough summary of the publishing market and economy in the Victorian age, see Theodore Hoppen, *The Mid-Victorian Generation: 1846-1886*, 1998, pp. 375-391.

or on the reports of the Blue Books, like in Disraeli and Dickens's novels (see Flint 1987).

The first Condition of England novel is Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil, or the Two Nations* (1845). Moreover, the subgenre includes Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1854), Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854), Charles Kingsley's *Yeast* (1848) and *Alton Locke* (1850), and Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1849). A late Condition of England novel is *Felix Holt* (1866) by George Eliot. This thesis takes into account only a limited corpus of Condition of England novels: *Sybil or the Two Nations*, *North and South*, *Hard Times*, and *Shirley*. *Sybil* is the first example of the subgenre, and therefore, it defines all the main themes, reiterated in subsequent Condition of England novels. The image of the "two nations" mentioned in the novel is a topos in the subgenre, outlining the representation of the nation as deeply divided. *North and South* articulates the theme of the divided country by highlighting England's geographical differences. Moreover, Gaskell's first-hand experience with the poor makes her novel an exceptional example of realism and a faithful portrayal of the working class. Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* engages with the discussion about the condition of women in Victorian society. The authors' view on the intersectionality between the working class and women's oppression provides a complementary point of view on the typical themes of the subgenre. Finally, Dickens is one of the most well-known and appreciated voices of Victorian England. His literary work is representative of an era, and his take on the Condition of England question in the novel *Hard Times* diverges from the other novels of the subgenre. Dickens's condemnation of the industrial society has a different target and offers a unique solution to contemporary social problems. All these novels have many commonalities with Brexit novels in terms of themes and images. The following sections introduce the chosen corpus, focusing on identifying the novels' key themes and stylistic elements. This analysis aims to establish how these elements can be related to the contemporary subgenre of the Brexit novel.

1.3 "The Two Nations" in *Sybil* by Benjamin Disraeli

Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil, or The Two Nations* is the first Condition of England novel. The novel delineates all the subgenre's main themes and pinpoints the fundamental role of literature in discussing political matters. In *Sybil,* Disraeli outlines the central trope of "the two nations" (the rich and the poor), condemning the corrupted ruling

classes and giving a voice to the impoverished working class. A fundamental element in *Sybil* is the nostalgia for a better past and the call for a return to paternalistic feudalism. All these themes also emerge in different Brexit novels. The identification of a divided nation is also central in the Brexit literary representation of Great Britain. In the same way, the nostalgic view and idealisation of the English past, with reference to the Anglo-Saxon tradition, central in Disraeli's novel, is a topic that resurfaces during the campaign for the Brexit referendum. Several Brexit novels, such as Melissa Harrison's *All Among the Barley* and Sarah Moss's *Ghost Wall*, capture this theme.

Disraeli's interest in engaging with social and political issues through novels stemmed from his job as a politician. His novels[42] and institutional career were strictly linked, and literature was a way to express his political beliefs. Benjamin Disraeli was a central political figure during Victoria's reign, and he was elected Prime Minister two times for the Tory party.[43] Between 1841 and 1845, after his exclusion from Peel's cabinet, he joined a small radical Tory group, the Young England Party, which was hostile to the government. Young England politics are central to understanding Disraeli's writings. It was an idealistic movement which called for a return to paternalistic feudal relationships and a revival of the social responsibilities of the three leading institutions – monarchy, Church, and aristocracy – towards the poor (Mariani 1981, 584). The party was against Utilitarianism, Whiggism, and socialism. They wanted a return to a strong monarchy supported by a responsible aristocracy, and they regarded religion and tradition as pivotal to preserving national balance. Disraeli was a prominent advocate for Young England's ideas, primarily through his "Young England Trilogy" (*Coningsby* (1844), *Sybil* (1845), and *Tancred* (1847)), which expressed the party's political beliefs. In 1849, he wrote in the preface to the fifth edition of *Coningsby*: "It was not originally the intention of the writer to adopt the form of fiction as the instrument to scatter his suggestions, but, after reflection, he resolved to avail himself of a method which, in the temper of the times, offered the best chance of influencing opinion" (Disraeli 1849, preface). Disraeli found literature

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[42] Disraeli's novels are *Vivian Grey* (1826), *The Young Duke* (1830), *Contarini Fleming* (1832), *Alroy* (1833), *Henrietta Temple* (1836), *Venetia* (1837), *Coningsby* (1844), *Sybil* (1845), *Tancred* (1847), *Lothair* (1870), *Endymion* (1880).

[43] Disraeli entered Parliament for the first time in 1832 but was elected for the Tory party only in 1837. When the Tory party won the elections in 1841 and Robert Peel became Prime Minister, Disraeli was excluded from the government. His attacks on Peel helped Disraeli become well known in Parliament, and he gained considerable influence in the Tory party, which he re-joined in 1845. He became Prime Minister in a Tory government in 1868 and again in 1874.

to be a potent medium for spreading his views on society and politics. *Sybil*, as well, is a political treatise written with the intent to criticise the Whigs and praise the Tories.

Sybil, or the Two Nations, revolves around the political maturation of the two protagonists: Charles Egremont, a young and progressive aristocrat, and Sybil, a beautiful and religious girl from a working-class family. The symbolic encounter between the two protagonists in the ruins of an old abbey is the starting point of their growth. Egremont educates himself about the plight of the working class and witnesses the poverty and misery of the people of Marney. He decides to take on his duty and become an MP to help the people. Sybil gradually loses her prejudice against the gentry and understands that the working class needs a hero and that this can only come from the aristocracy.[44] The discovery that Sybil also has noble origins allows for the marriage between the two. In the background of this romantic story, Disraeli considers the Chartist agitations. Walter Gerard and Stephen Morley want to bring their petition to Parliament, but the disdain of the members (except for Egremont) causes the explosion of protests. All the working-class characters are represented as victims of their unhealthy environment and economic situation (Schwarz 1974, 27). Their rage and violence are only a response to the carelessness of the aristocracy to the needs of the poor. As opposed to this, Disraeli depicts the village of Mowdale, presided over by the benevolent Mr. Trafford, whose enlightened management of the mill favours better living conditions for the workers. The idyllic description of the village, clean and tidy, with a big church symbolising the importance of faith, is the ideal image of industrial feudalism that Disraeli wishes to promote. The aristocracy must understand their responsibility as benevolent patrons to improve the condition of the masses. *Sybil*'s purpose is to corroborate Disraeli's political philosophy. In the novel, every character epitomises a specific aspect of contemporary society. Disraeli portrays the failure of Chartist leader Walter Gerard, the materialist intellectual Stephen Morley, and the corrupted aristocrat Lord Marney. The main characters, Egremont and Sybil, undergo a process of growth which epitomises the awakening of the aristocratic conscience and the restoration of the Church.[45] The novel concludes with their marriage, which represents a fictional union between the "two nations".

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[44] In this respect, Disraeli agrees with Carlyle's belief that a noble hero should guide the nation towards a better and more just future. This idea effectively excludes the need for a mass social movement that can potentially change society.

[45] Religious reformation is a theme represented in the book through the figure of the priest St. Lys, an enlightened cleric who believes in the necessity of restoring the Church to its past powers. Disraeli's

Sybil's stylistic features are emblematic of Condition of England novels. Realism serves the function of exposing the gritty conditions of the poor. Disraeli drew heavily on parliamentary reports and Blue Books to describe the living situation of the most destitute people. There are entire passages transcribed from official sources (see Fido 1977, and Smith 1962). These bare and realistic excerpts, copied from the reports, contrast with the author's flamboyant style, which is visible in the romantic parts of the novel. The detailed passages from Blue Books contribute to the realistic description of the social situation, but the characterisation of working-class people is often stereotypical, and their dialogues are implausible (Blake 1966, 218). Another distinctive aspect of Disraeli's style is the juxtaposition of scenes of working-class and aristocratic life. This technique helps emphasise the contrast between the misery of the poor and the aristocratic wealth, but it also signals the ordinary people's vitality against the aristocracy's indolence and stupidity (Schwarz 1974, 24-25). *Sybil*'s combination of realism and romance is a distinctive stylistic feature that characterises all the successive Condition of England novels.

Sybil revolves around the themes of social inequality, political corruption, and the need for social change through the restoration of past traditions. The book's central trope, "the two nations", highlights the stark contrast between the rich and the poor, delineating the typical representation of the national divide, which is also structural to Brexit novels. Disraeli condemns the social injustices and the government, which he deems responsible for the contemporary state of the nation. The novel investigates political corruption, depicting the ruling classes as immoral and greedy, with no regard for the welfare of the people. At the same time, the degraded working class is pushed to the brink by the unjust actions of the ruling classes and reacts with violence and protests. The novel's portrayal of the working class is particularly insightful, as it highlights the struggles and indignities that they face daily. Disraeli's proposed solution for social peace is that the aristocracy must take a paternalistic approach to protect the working class, as seen through the character of Egremont. The hope for a return to enlightened feudalism is the sentiment which characterises *Sybil*. The worship of a past where the aristocracy, the Church and the Crown were firm in their purpose to take care of the people set Disraeli's political agenda and literary work. All

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sympathy for the Oxford movement, at its peak in that period, and for Catholicism is evident. This theme will be developed in the subsequent novel *Tancred*, where Judaism is identified as the cradle of Christianity.

these themes are recovered not only in other Condition of England novels but also in contemporary forms of fiction, such as the Brexit novel.

Sybil, or the Two Nations is relevant because it testifies to the role of the novel as a political tool. Disraeli uses the novel to spread his political ideas among a vast public, managing to enter the houses of the readers and push for a modification in opinion. This is central to the development of literature as a determining influence in the national discourse. The novel becomes involved in the public debate, potentially orientating public opinion. The strict link between literature and national discourse (which will be deeply analysed in Chapter 4) takes its moves from the engagement of Condition of England novelists in writing about social and political issues (Kumar 2015, 183). In this respect, Disraeli is a forerunner, imbuing his novels with a political purpose (Schwarz 1974, 2). Similarly, since the Brexit referendum, writers have been recovering a form of narration that engages in dialogue with the political world. Brexit novels recuperate the role of Condition of England novels in depicting the present social situation and trying to propose a counter-narrative to the dominant national discourse.

1.4 Fictional Philanthropy: Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*

Disraeli expressed his political beliefs through narration, adopting the novel as the medium for spreading the Young England Party's ideas. Other authors, such as Elizabeth Gaskell, attributed a philanthropic meaning to their writings, using literature to increase awareness and help the poor. Elizabeth Gaskell was a central interpreter of English industrial society. In her most important novels, *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1854), she portrays the condition of the working class in Manchester and offers solutions to the clash between masters and men. Gaskell drew her stories from her own experiences. She was the wife of a Unitarian minister in Manchester and had a rich social and cultural life. Thanks to her husband's role in the community, she met with the poorest strata of the population. Gaskell practised philanthropism, visiting low-income families around the city. She also participated in several educational activities for the poor, and she was familiar with their living and working conditions from her tours of factories and her husband's involvement in sanitary reforms (Foster 2002, 23).

Her personal knowledge of the subject is evident in her writings, where she describes Manchester and its working-class people with documentary precision, also

using the local idiom (Adams 2009, 92).[46] Gaskell's novels, even if they have typical melodramatic features and a romance plot, avoid artistic exaggeration, and her style is essentially realist. The characterisation is not stereotypical, and her first-hand experience of the working-class environment is evident in the highly credible characters she depicts. Philanthropy is given a central role as a solution to poverty and distress. Her writings are presented as works of fictional philanthropy. Gaskell writes to educate the upper classes about the plight of the poor and to evoke a passionate response from the readers, appealing to their morality and Christian sensitivity to push them to do acts of philanthropy (Parker 1997, 322). In fact, for the author, feelings of compassion and shared humanity could prevent the conflict between capital and labourers. Improving workers' conditions and avoiding social unrest is only possible when masters understand their employees and focus on personal relationships rather than cash nexus. Empathetic relations are the solution to creating a sense of belonging and mending national divisions. Similarly, in Brexit novels, familial bonds and emotional attachments overcome differences, promoting a more cohesive and welcoming national identity. Individual relationships bridge the gap between characters, which epitomise the Leave and the Remain side (for instance, in Cartwright's *The Cut* or Smith's *Winter*). Feelings and mutual understanding overpower class hatred, geographical distance, or political prejudices. This concept, which emerges in various Brexit novels, is central to Gaskell's literary production.

This thesis considers only the novel *North and South,* which contains a more complex stratification of themes in comparison with *Mary Barton,* where the author portrays the canonical conflict between masters and men. In *North and South*, Gaskell also articulates the contrast between the pastoral, slow way of living of the south of England and the fast-paced, industrial north, as well as the opposition between London and the rest of the country. The distinction between the countryside and the city, and the north and south of England, has a long tradition in English literature and entails the divergence between different forms of civilisation (Cazamian 1973, 226). This theme is also elaborated in Brexit novels, and it has been an important point of discussion in the Brexit debate, where geographical differences have come again to

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[46] The use of the local demotic is particularly evident in Gaskell's novels but is a stylistic choice shared by other Condition of England novelists. Interestingly, working-class characters also speak a regional idiom in several Brexit novels.

the fore to highlight the country's divisions.[47] In *North and South*, Gaskell also elaborates on the theme of immigration. She considers the clash between English and Irish labourers and opens the discussion on the treatment that imported Irish labourers endured. Another fundamental element in *North and South* is the representation of female characters as mediators between the classes. Middle-class women are described as bearers of awareness about the plight of the working class to their fellow middle-class men.[48] Practising philanthropy, bourgeois women interacted with working-class people and formed personal relationships with them, building a connection between the classes (see Parker 1997). In many Condition of England novels, as well as in various Brexit novels, female characters are essential to create a dialogue across the divide. As will be analysed, women take the role of mediators between the divide, for instance, in Ali Smith's novels, and establish meaningful relationships between different faces of the nation.

The representation of women as mediators in *North and South* serves the author's aim to educate middle-class female readers about their possible position in society. Through the characterisation of the protagonist, Margaret, Gaskell aims to create a place for women to contribute to the public discourse about social changes. Margaret Hale is the daughter of a clergyman living in the rural South. Her father renounces his ecclesiastic role, and the family is forced to move to Milton (a fictional Manchester) in the north of England. In Milton, Margaret faces the harsh reality of industrial life and is shocked by the contrast with her idyllic idea of Helstone. In the novel, the clash between north and south is also epitomised by the meeting between Margaret and John Thornton, a hard-hearted industrialist. Thornton is a self-made man who strongly believes in the theories of classical economy and puts the law of the market before any moral duty or sentiment. His behaviour pushes his workers to strike. Margaret decides to mediate between Thornton and his workers. In the end, Thornton understands the importance of having personal relationships with his men. This decision brings him to near bankruptcy. Fortunately, Margaret receives an unexpected inheritance, a development typical of many Victorian novels. Their final marriage

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[47] The dialectic between the country and the city will be elaborated further, with reference to Raymond Williams' pivotal work *The Country and the City* (1973).

[48] This theme is detectable in most of the Condition of England novels: Sybil, Margaret, Sissy (and Louisa), Caroline and Shirley are all symbolically associated with the working class even when they belong to the bourgeoisie. This position makes it possible for them to act as intermediaries between the classes. This idea will be better analysed in subsequent chapters.

establishes the union between the instances they epitomise: capital and feeling. The finale implies that social change can be obtained if the public world of commerce and industrial production is infused with the moral values associated with the private and domestic realms (Guy 1996, 167).

The character of Margaret functions as a mediator between public and private and between masters and men. In presenting Margaret as the exemplary woman visitor able to perform philanthropy on a personal level and to create relationships with the poor, Gaskell wants to set out a model for middle-class women and their central role in creating the base for social changes (Elliott 1994, 25). Not only does Margaret develop friendships with the poor, but she can also report their plight to the middle class (represented by Thornton). Talk and sympathy turn class conflict into harmony (Elliott 1994, 43). Women can help mediate and avoid social conflicts thanks to their first-hand knowledge of the poor (Starr 2002, 387). The mediation between polarities (poor-rich, North-South, men-women) is a theme that is detectable in many Brexit novels, such as *The Cut*, *The Lie of the Land*, or *Middle England*, all of which aim at presenting the possibility of national reconciliation.

1.5 Sharing the Struggle: Women and Working Class in *Shirley*

Elizabeth Gaskell explores the role of women in engaging with social issues and contributing to the discourse about the condition of the poor in England. This idea is further developed by another eminent voice of Victorian literature: Charlotte Brontë. Charlotte Brontë's novels have received much attention from feminist critics, especially in the 1970s, for her ability to give voice to women's perspectives. She is one of the few novelists who focused on the problem of unmarried women and their destinies without any economic support from a man (Taylor 1979, 83). She started exploring this theme in her first published novel, *Jane Eyre* (1847), but she outlined it more fully in *Shirley* (1849).

Shirley, a Condition of England novel, also considers the plight of the working class and, specifically, the Luddite machine-breaking riots which occurred in the north of England in 1811–13. Although it is set in the past, the description of the workers' unrest refers to the Chartist movement and the wave of revolutionary impulses hitting Europe at the time of writing (Roberts 2020, 34). *Shirley* shares the conventional plot structure of other Condition of England novels, particularly *North and South*. The author criticises the "avaricious manufacturer" Robert Gerard Moore and the violent

response of the Luddites, who attack Moore's mill (Roberts 2020, 41). Moore eventually has a change of heart due to the experience of being shot by one of the workers. Thanks to the love of one of the female protagonists, Caroline Helstone, he becomes a better master. With this novel, Brontë intended to draw sympathy towards the working classes and their condition and discredit their misrepresentation as ignorant and violent (Roberts 2020, 47). Throughout the novel, the author depicts bad and good characters from all social classes, satirising the curates as well as mill owners and workers. The solution for the clash between the classes is again based on feelings of common respect and Christianity. In the end, through the reconciliation between Caroline and Moore and the recovery of the market due to the end of the Napoleonic wars, social peace is again established in the village, where landed property (Shirley) and industry (Moore) govern as benevolent masters.[49]

The exploration of the subject of social unrest and class conflict is counterbalanced by the romantic stories of middle-class characters, which outline the gender theme at the core of the novel. The two protagonists are, in fact, two women, Shirley and Caroline, who try to find their place in a world governed by men. As Helen Taylor argues, in *Shirley*, there is an attempt to critique the control of bourgeois men over both the working class and women, who are equally oppressed (Taylor 1979, 86). Through analogy with male proletarian struggle, Brontë explores the social position of middle-class women who are economically dependent on men and rendered powerless yet potentially disruptive (Taylor 1979, 87). Moreover, through the character of Caroline, Brontë moves her most felt complaints about the destiny of "old maids", who cannot be economically independent and, not being married, do not have any place in the Victorian world. Caroline calls for women to access occupations outside the house. Shirley, in a more mystical way,[50] advocates for equality between "Adam and Eve", envisioning women's freedom to discuss politics and interpret religion in their own way, unmediated by men (Greene 1994, 351-352). The focus on women's ability to speak up for their rights in a male world is of particular interest to this dissertation and will be analysed further. The representation of marginalised women, who offer a

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[49] This conclusion was considered unsatisfactory, especially by Marxist critics. Terry Eagleton argues that the actual focus of the story is the recovery of the ruling classes to their position of power, which is only temporarily troubled by the working-class uprising. See Terry Eagleton, *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontës*, 1975.

[50] Charlotte Brontë was possibly referring to her sister Emily when describing Shirley's most mystical moments (like when she has a vision of the titan-woman in the moors). Emily Brontë died while Charlotte was writing *Shirley* (see Greene 1994, 366).

different perspective in a moment of national trouble, is a relevant leitmotif in Brexit novels, such as Sarah Moss' *Ghost Wall* or Ali Smith's *Winter* and *Spring*. The comparison between the female protagonists of these novels will be necessary to cement the central hypothesis of an underlying similarity between Condition of England novels and Brexit novels.

Charlotte Brontë's proto-feminist message is undercut by the conclusion of the novel, in which Shirley and Caroline find their place in society as married women. After all, Brontë was writing in the Victorian age, when the possibility for women's rebellion against social rules could exist only in fiction. In the same way, the improvement of working-class conditions is partially obtained thanks to Caroline's charitable philanthropy, the improvement of general economic conditions and the will of benevolent masters.[51] Even so, what is interesting in *Shirley* is the comparison between the working class and women and the envisaged possibility of their rebellion against the imposed authority. The assimilation of femininity with workers is something that is, in more subtle ways, present also in other Condition of England novels,[52] and the same applies to the representation of women's ability to mediate between the "two nations", as it has been argued about Gaskell's novel. Both women and poor are described as Other, often incapable of fitting in the rules imposed by the strict Victorian society and the heartless Utilitarian ideology. For this reason, it is possible for women (at least in the novels) to feel immediate sympathy for the poor and to act as mediators with the bourgeois man. Similarly, in some Brexit novels, women play a dual role as outsiders and mediators, applying their unique perspectives to bridge the divide and resolve conflicts. These female characters embody the challenges of navigating a time of political turmoil. Their ability to foster understanding between different sides entails the possibility of social change and a future of national unity. The pivotal function of women in promoting sympathy and communication is represented, as well, in Charles Dickens's only Condition of England novel, *Hard Times*.

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[51] Shirley embodies the benevolent master, as already personified in *Sybil* through Mr. Trafford's character. She pursues philanthropy to alleviate the conditions of the poor and, working in harmony with Moore, she becomes an ideal figure within the community.

[52] Sybil, Margaret, Sissy (and Louisa), and of course, Caroline and Shirley are all subject to Otherisation, and associated with the working class even when they belong to the bourgeoisie. This position makes it possible for them to act as intermediaries between the classes. This theme is further developed in Chapter 3, section 3.4.

1.6 Charles Dickens' Industrial Novel: *Hard Times*

Charles Dickens is one of the most famous and influential writers of all times. His novels are well known, and Dickens has become one of the national symbols of Great Britain. This thesis takes into account his Condition of England novel, *Hard Times*, written in 1854. Dickens always expressed interest in representing contemporary society, mixing high and popular culture in his novels to entertain and educate the readers. His writing was democratic and intended to appeal to all social classes, showing that fancy and morality could combine (Paroissien 2008, 142-143). Dickens was considered a reformer, and he always had sympathy for the poor, which he often represented in his novels (Hawes 2007, 31). He practised philanthropy – mostly to help the so-called "fallen women"[53] – but mainly carried out social action through his writings. In fact, most of his journal articles focused on promoting social reform, particularly education and sanitary reforms. Moreover, in his activity as a novelist, Dickens found the perfect medium to foster social change and sympathy towards the lower strata of the population (Marshall 2002, 27).[54] In *Hard Times,* Dickens used the novel to analyse the "factory question". In 1838, he travelled to Manchester to visit a factory and remained deeply impressed by the condition of the workers. The trip and the pressing requests from his readers to publish a Condition of England novel (which was in trend then) urged him to write *Hard Times*.

The novel is set in the imaginary Coketown, an industrial city in the north of England where everything works under the regulations of Utilitarianism. One of the protagonists, Thomas Gradgrind, rejects sentiment and emotion to pursue "nothing but facts" (Dickens 1854, 3). Gradgrind educates his children and all the pupils in the school of Coketown with strict utilitarian discipline. Dickens' representation of the Coketown school demonstrates the harmful consequences of an educational system only based on numbers and notions. All the Gradgrind family suffers because of this frame of mind. On the contrary, Dickens proposes an idea of education based on emotion and "fancy", acknowledging the fundamental role of the novel and other forms of popular entertainment as a means to educate people (Paroissien 2008, 144). The idea that imagination and creative writing are the most effective tools to promote an emotional education and create authentic relationships is also structural to Ali

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[53] Dickens founded and ran with his friend Angela Burdett Coutts the "Urania Cottage", a home set up to help rescue women from prostitution. This commitment lasted from 1846 to 1858.
[54] In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens openly criticises the New Poor Law of 1834.

Smith's Brexit novels. The ability of some of Smith's characters to play with language is a corollary to their inclination to envision a different, better world, as will be investigated later.

In *Hard Times,* the importance of imagination is thematised through the depiction of Sleary's circus as a place of genuine relationships and feelings (Adams 2009, 129). The opposition between Coketown and the circus, "facts" and "fancy", is the basic structure of the novel and different characters epitomise each side. The negative ones are the archetype of the "economic man" (Bounderby, Slackbridge, Bitzer): they are only interested in their benefits and live their life following the utilitarian ideology and ignoring any form of affection or genuine relationship. These characters are the main target of Dickens' criticism. Dickens condemned the industrial society, which had favoured the enrichment of evil mill owners, incapable of feeling Christian compassion towards their workers.[55] The positive characters are those guided by moral sympathy, not economic interest (Blackpool, Rachael, Sissy). Utilitarianism cannot corrupt them because of their inherent morality.[56] Blackpool, Rachael, and Sissy (as well as the liminal characters of the circus "family") can also create meaningful relationships. The family theme is pivotal in the novel and includes the harsh criticism of the laws regulating divorces.[57] All the Coketown marriages are abusive (except Sissy's, which is not even part of the narrative action), and none of them can be repaired. The marriages are corrupted by the lack of human compassion promoted by utilitarian education (Paroissien 2008, 398). Various Brexit novels, such as *Middle England*, *Winter* and *The Lie of the Land*, also portray social issues through the lens of family dynamics. The family unit becomes a mirror to reflect upon the broader social problems. Through the comparison with Condition of England novels, this thesis explores how authors represent the Brexit experience through their characters' familial relationships.

Dickens's condemnation is not limited to the industrialist laissez-faire Bounderby and heartless utilitarian Gradgrind. The author is also unsympathetic towards Chartism and working-class violence, embodied in the character of the trade

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[55] In this respect, Dickens adopted Thomas Carlyle's ideas and his criticism of mechanisation. Dickens admired the philosopher so much that he dedicated *Hard Times* to him.

[56] Morality is a natural characteristic, while Utilitarianism is a taught doctrine. For this reason, it is possible for some characters, like Louisa and Gradgrind, to find their true moral self and abandon the teachings of Utilitarianism.

[57] Dickens strongly supported the reform to regulate divorces, which at the time were almost impossible to obtain, especially for women and poor people.

unionist Slackbridge. Slackbridge is only interested in fuelling the workers' anger, even against their good.[58] For the author, the main fault of both trade unionism and utilitarianism is the total annihilation of individuality. Stephen Blackpool, an honest worker who wanted to maintain his individuality and his ideas, can find a place neither between the lines of Utilitarianism nor those of unionism. Like many other Condition of England novelists, Dickens saw individual integrity as "the last vestige of humanity" (Coles 1986, 168) and the only way to defy the forces of industrialism and Chartism. An unusual feature of *Hard Times*, among Dickens' and social-problem novels, is the lack of their typical achievement of redemption. At the end of the story, there is no reconciliation, and the social classes represented remain opposed (Coles 1986, 16-170). The end of the novel is bleak; the good characters have no happy ending, and the bad ones are only tangentially punished. Life in Coketown continues as usual, with no hope of bridging the gap between masters and workers.

The negative ending has contributed to the ambivalent reception of the novel, which was criticised for its oversimplifications in its assessment of industrialisation, for its attacks on the utilitarian philosophy (Paroissien 2008, 390), and for its stereotypical representation of the working-class characters (especially by Marxist critics). Anne Humpherys argues that the thin characterisation and thematisation of the novel are due to the weekly publication format, which allotted the author a limited space. In *Hard Times*, Dickens had to simplify the plot and characters (Paroissien 2008, 391-392). At the same time, this favoured the emergence of a compact web of symbols, references, and metaphors, making *Hard Times* an excellent example of allegorical fiction. Language and figures of speech, especially metaphors, become central to understanding the novel's message. Dickens uses biblical references,[59] images from natural processes, fairy tales and nursery rhymes. These are the very fanciful forms that are denied in Coketown, and which symbolically oppose the mechanistic and fact-based system that governs the city (Paroissien 2008, 396). The use of language, metaphors, and symbols as a tool to express a social message and the subsequent idea that literature itself, because of its imaginative quality, can oppose the social and political reality, is central in Ali Smith's seasonal quartet as well. No

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[58] In 1854, when writing *Hard Times*, Dickens visited Preston, where a famous strike occurred. He drew the Union's representation from what he witnessed on that occasion. Dickens shared his criticism of trade unions with other Condition of England authors like Gaskell and Disraeli.

[59] The novel is divided in three parts: "Sowing", "Reaping, and "Garnering", following the narrative structure of a sermon, with a final moral of the story repeated to the readers.

wonder that Smith's novels are embroidered with Dickens' references. *Spring*, the third instalment of the cycle, opens with a direct reference to *Hard Times*: "Now what we don't want is Facts" (Smith 2019, 3), which reverses the opening of Dickens' novel: "Now, what I want is, Facts" (Dickens 1854, 3). *Spring* also plays on the duality between imaginative power and reality through characterisation, as already outlined in Dickens' *Hard Times*.

Smith's references to Dickens's novel are only one between various knots that tie together Condition of England novels and Brexit novels. This new subgenre emerged from the political turmoil that followed the Brexit referendum. Social and political engagement is fundamental in this subgenre. For this reason, it is essential to explore the historical context in which Brexit novels developed. The next chapter considers the Brexit event, its causes, and its consequences, focusing on its cultural implications. Subsequently, the chapter offers an overview of the themes, the stylistic features, and the aims of Brexit novels. The outline of the corpus of selected novels forms the foundation for comparing Condition of England novels and Brexit novels in the following chapters.

CHAPTER 2

From Brexit to Brexit Novels: Narrative Responses to the Political Turmoil

> The gaps between north and south,
> between the social classes,
> between Londoners and everyone else,
> between rich Londoners and poor Londoners,
> and between white and brown and black
> are real and need to be confronted by all of us,
> not only those who voted Leave.
> (Smith, 2016)

2.1 "Taking Back Control": the Brexit Conundrum

The Condition of England novel emerged as a response to an era of economic and political transformations. Literature contributed to the discussion about the condition of the working class, fostering, through narration, class sympathy and a sense of national unity. Similarly, in recent years, the fast-paced changes provoked by globalisation, neo-liberalism, and economic crisis pushed many novelists to react and engage in dialogue with the political world. In particular, the referendum for Brexit in 2016 and the consequent exit from the EU raised many questions regarding British identity and motivated writers to consider the contemporary social situation and try to answer the most urgent interrogations in narrative forms. This chapter offers an overview of the issues raised by Brexit, mentioning the motives behind the Leave vote and trying to envision the possible consequences. The study of the contemporary social and political context is relevant to identifying the emergence of the literary subgenre of the Brexit novel. The Brexit event has stimulated the interest and imagination of many writers, who felt the urge to address the present social situation and participate in the political discussion provoked by Brexit. Therefore, this chapter explores how Brexit gave rise to BrexLit, focusing on the emergence of the subgenre of the Brexit

novel. Through the presentation of the chosen corpus, the chapter explores this subgenre's themes, stylistic features, and aims. The selected Brexit novels will be analysed and compared to Condition of England novels in the subsequent chapters.

On the 23rd of June 2016, Great Britain voted to leave the European Union, an unprecedented decision that questioned the stability of the European project. Political analysts, sociologists, and other experts have extensively studied the reasons that led to this referendum to understand its causes and consequences. Different commentators have argued that the result of the referendum was not surprising, given the long history of Euroscepticism in the UK. In fact, the diplomatic ties between Great Britain and the European Community have frequently been described as "cautious and parochial." (Maccaferri 2019, 391). Over at least five centuries, the British Isles have maintained a distinct identity separate from continental Europe in terms of both cultural and economic bonds. In the postcolonial era, this has led to a preference for political partnerships with the Commonwealth and other English-speaking nations, such as the United States. The British have long held a perception that their cultural values, economic orientation, and political traditions are fundamentally different from those of their European neighbours. This sense of separateness has contributed to a deep-seated hostility towards Europe and the European Union (Maccaferri 2019, 392). As Linda Colley suggests, British identity has been created around the opposition to the European Other (initially France and then Germany) (Colley 2009, 6). The feeling of being "exceptional"[60] and different often relates to a romanticised view of Great Britain's glorious history (Shaw 2021, 5), leading to a perceived superiority linked to the past achievements and grandeur of the British Empire.[61]

In addition, Great Britain's entry in the EU has been a complicated process. The UK joined the EEC only in 1973, almost twenty years after its creation.[62] During this period, the position of Great Britain towards the European project was always of

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[60] British exceptionalism derives from a long political and economic supremacy history. It involves not only the feeling of being different from the European Other but also that of being superior in terms of economic and political power, cultural advancement, and democracy. See Macejka, John. "The Connection Between British Exceptionalism and Brexit." *North Carolina Journal of European Studies*, vol 2.1, 2021, pp. 54-65.

[61] The centrality of nostalgia in the British national discourse is analysed in detail in Chapter 4, section 4.4.

[62] Initially, Great Britain refused to join the Union due to concerns over its supranational character, which was perceived as a threat to British sovereignty. In 1961, pushed by the economic crisis, UK Prime Minister Harold Macmillan applied to enter the EEC, but France vetoed the application in 1963 and again in 1967.

support but never of personal interest. The role of the UK was that of a benevolent external patron "drap[ing] itself around Europe's outer rims" (Habermann 2019, 23) rather than directly taking part in European politics. When Great Britain finally joined the EU, it was in a moment of strong economic crisis and loss of political power due to the dissolution of the Empire and internal calls for devolution. Accessing the EEC was seen as the only solution to reinvigorate the British economy and regain centrality in the international political landscape. Therefore, European membership has always been connected to a sense of decline (Maccaferri 2019, 391-392). All these discourses about European membership became prominent during the 2016 Brexit referendum campaign. Britain's Euroscepticism came once again to the fore, so much so that the Leave campaign was carried out not only by parties of the nationalist and populist right but also by leading exponents of the ruling Conservative party, who were convinced supporters of British independence from the "bureaucrats of Brussels".

Several factors came into play in the decision to leave the EU. As Zadie Smith asks her readers: "[w]hat was it really about? Immigration? Inequality? Historic xenophobia? Sovereignty? EU bureaucracy? Anti-neoliberal revolution? Class war?" (Smith, 2016). Many investigations about the vote revealed that not only Euroscepticism but also sentiments against immigration and disaffection towards the political establishment played a central role in the decision to leave the EU. Leave voters considered the EU and European policies only the third among the reasons to withdraw from the Union. The Leavers regarded the desire for immigration control and mistrust in the government as the primary motivations for voting for Brexit (Hobolt 2016). As writer Jonathan Coe observes:

> Brexit is not primarily about Britain's membership in the European Union, and never was. […] Instead, the narrow majority for Leave was patched together from a grumbling coalition of discontents that had been bubbling away beneath the surface of British life for at least ten years. (Coe 2019b)

Deep discontent with the political elite and the country's economic situation significantly influenced the vote for Brexit. The referendum highlighted the divides within the nation: citizens with a lower level of education and belonging to poorer social classes, the so-called 'left behind', voted for Leave. Graduates living in the major urban centres (especially Londoners) voted to remain in the European Union

(BES 2016). The aftermath of Brexit brought to light the struggles of the left behind.[63] The disenfranchisement of a large part of the British people has been a pivotal point of discussion in the political arena and has also been a recurring theme in Brexit novels. The left behind are economically insecure working-class voters who feel abandoned by national and international politics as they have been most affected by globalisation and EU migration rules. Left-behind citizens have been disenfranchised by the economic policies and threatened by the influx of European migrants (mainly from Eastern European countries). As a result, many saw Brexit as an opportunity to voice their concerns, express their grievances, and demonstrate their disapproval of the government. Brexit has been defined as "a working-class uprising", a warning against the inequalities of global capitalism from those British citizens who paid through austerity and cuts in social welfare for a financial crisis they were not responsible for (Cfr. Seidler 2018).[64] O'Toole argues that white working-class men have been led to vote Leave by anxiety about their status in a globalised, multicultural world.[65] Phenomena like feminism, multiculturalism, immigration, and globalisation are eroding a "natural order" in which white men are privileged (O'Toole 2018, 85). In this world, male citizens feel like they are the minority in danger: they are the victims. This "transference of victimhood" and self-pity combine anger with the reassurance of being in the right. Brexit redirected this anger towards immigrants and Brussels bureaucrats: "The great salve to anxiety is the sense of control. The Brexit campaign spoke directly to this need with its brilliant slogan: Take Back Control" (O'Toole 2018, 85) and gave the left behind a sense of power in a moment of powerlessness (O'Toole 2018, 132). The Leave campaign, led by UKIP leader Nigel Farage, offered these people an idea of a strong nation anchored in a glorious imperial past in which they could recognise themselves. It presented an image of a rural and ethnically homogeneous Britain, which could ideally be recovered through a divorce from Europe and open border politics.

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[63] For the definition of the left behind, I draw on James Morrison's extensive study, *The Left Behind: Reimagining Britain's Socially Excluded*, 2022. This topic will also be confronted extensively in Chapter 3, section 3.3.

[64] "According to Ford and Goodwin, UKIP's radical right revolt was 'a working-class phenomenon', 'anchored in a clear social base: older, blue-collar voters, citizens with few qualifications, whites and men'" (2014: 175; 270) (quoted in Shaw 2021, 186).

[65] Left behind are more frequently white men. Men often feel disenfranchised when they lose their jobs and cannot provide for their families. The feeling arises from a patriarchal view of gender roles. See Victor J. Seidler's *Making Sense of Brexit*, 2018, chapter 3, for reference about the link between Brexit and masculinity.

The question of open borders has been another defining issue in the years leading to the referendum. While, in the last century, the immigration debate focused on the flux of people coming from the former British colonies (especially from the Caribbean and Asia), since 2004, the year of the enlargement of the EU, the focus has shifted towards Eastern European immigrants, mainly from Poland and Romania. The fear of invasion[66] has been exploited by the right-wing nationalist parties to legitimise latent xenophobia and appeal to those voters who feared losing their jobs because of the rising numbers of incomers (O'Toole 2018, 92).

> […] immigration and border politics were the pivotal issues swaying an electorate who feared refugees would struggle to assimilate in a new culture, place a significant strain on host economies and public services and increase competition for jobs thus reducing national wages. (Shaw 2021, 142)

The concerns over immigration have been used to justify exiting the European Union. The denigration of immigrants has been the primary rhetorical device used by Brexiteers in their propaganda. The Leave campaign has been centred on the idea of sovereignty, border control and "sending back home" unwanted immigrants. An example is the controversial poster "Breaking Point" presented by Nigel Farage, which features a photo of many refugees attempting to enter the Hungarian border. The image of the racialised (and possibly Muslim) foreign Other was used to recall imaginaries produced by racist and imperial ideologies (Eaglestone 2018, 85). In the mind of the electorate, the fear of immigration and the idea of the EU were fused (Shaw 2021, 21). In the Leave discourse, only Brexit could free Great Britain from the obligations of open border policies, reinstating control over borders and giving back to UK citizens the national sovereignty they thought they had lost. The theme of immigration is also recovered in Brexit novels. Several writers engaged with the topic, trying to oppose

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[66] Immigrants entering the UK have often been mentioned in tabloids and newspapers through metaphors that describe them as a negative force, invading and destroying British society. There have been several studies on how portrayals of immigrants in the media discourse have favoured negative opinions towards immigration. See, for instance, Scott Blinder and Anne-Marie Jeannet's "The 'illegal' and the skilled: effects of media portrayals on perceptions of immigrants in Britain", 2018, or Scott Blinder and William L. Allen's "Constructing immigrants: Portrayals of migrant groups in British national newspapers, 2010–2012.", 2016, or Scott Blinder and William L. Allen. "Migration in the news: Portrayals of immigrants, migrants, asylum seekers and refugees in national British newspapers, 2010-2012.", 2013.

the xenophobic and hostile rhetoric of the referendum and offer a multicultural and welcoming image of the national community.

Brexiteers proposed an insular idea of the country, simultaneously implying that Brexit was a chance to "return" to the Anglosphere and the old Commonwealth partners (Wellings 2019, 132). For this purpose, it was necessary "that the Empire [was] rehabilitated as one of history's 'good things' to allow Britons to imagine themselves distanced from, or completely outside of, the EU." (Wellings 2019, 106). The nostalgia for the British imperial past has been another pivotal matter in the Leave rhetoric. As Nadine El-Enani maintains, Great Britain has never really addressed the legacies of imperialism, including that of racism. That is why the Leave discourse tended to romanticise the days of the British Empire (El-Enani 2017), successfully appealing to a "post-imperial melancholia" (see Gilroy 2004). According to Anshuman Mondal,

> This imperially nostalgic nationalism is the only thing that working-class leavers in the post-industrial wastelands of 21st century Britain and the well-to-do leavers in the leafy Tory shires have in common, and it is rooted in what Raymond Williams calls the "structure of feeling" produced by ideology (Williams, 1977), in this case the structure of feeling produced by imperial ideologies and imaginaries that have still not fully wound their way through the digestive tracts of the United Kingdom's body politic. (Eaglestone 2018, 85)

The term "structure of feeling" designates a set of social experiences and ideas which have not been fully articulated.[67] For Mondal, the legacy of the Empire and imperial ideologies have still not been elaborated, and, therefore, they provoke an emotional response from British citizens. In the run-up to Brexit, the Leave parties used this nostalgic emotional leverage to campaign for the exit from the EU. The celebration of the Empire was also strictly linked to WWII memories of endurance from invasion.[68] British Eurosceptic discourses often refer to Britain as the only nation that withstood Nazi invasion. WWII memory is connected to the radical idea that the European Union

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[67] See Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 1977.
[68] Interestingly, this celebration of the WWII myth of endurance was also legitimised through the heroic narrative in movies such as *Dunkirk*, *Churchill,* and *Darkest Hour* (all released in 2017). See for reference: Stratton Jon. "The Language of Leaving: Brexit, the Second World War and Cultural Trauma." *Journal for Cultural Research*, 2019. This theme will be explored in more detail in Chapter 4.

is a continuation of a more insidious form of previous attempts at domination from the continent, "a soft-Nazi superstate" (See O'Toole 2018, chapter 2). This concept becomes central to understanding why much Brexit rhetoric, paradoxically, was built around the idea of Great Britain as being colonised by the EU. In a reversal of roles, the coloniser has become the colonised. Nigel Farage declared the 23rd of June 2016 as British "Independence Day" while evoking and obscuring Britain's own colonial history (Eaglestone 2018, 82). The Leave campaign played on these feelings, idealising the British past as a moment of greatness and power compared to when the EU presumably prevented Britain from being "Great Again". "Making Britain Great Again" is one of Nigel Farage's nationalist slogans that expresses a nostalgic melancholy of Great Britain's glorious days and attempts to appeal to the British sense of identity linked to their history (Alessio 2020, 8). The longing for a past considered better than the present, exploited by the Brexiteers, is a frequent theme in Brexit novels. The authors criticise the nostalgic discourse of the referendum campaign and expose the dangers of nativist rhetoric through narration.

Interestingly, in the Brexit discourse, nostalgia was connected to an English rather than a British imaginary. Englishness provided comfort and certainty when envisioning the UK's future outside Europe (O'Toole 2018, 180). After the fall of the Empire, another major event shook the sense of a united British national identity. The devolutionary process began in 1997, and partial parliamentary autonomy was granted to Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Devolution caused the English people to feel an increased loss of political centrality within the Kingdom. This sense of bewilderment encouraged the search for an English national identity directed to nostalgic visions of the past (Alessio 2020, 12) and re-opened the discussion about the so-called "West Lothian Question".[69] Sociologist and political expert Michael Kenny argues that: "we are living in a moment of English nationalism" (Kenny 2012, 154), outlining how, in recent years, England has been following a trajectory of isolation not only from the European continent but also from the United Kingdom itself. This phenomenon was also reflected in the results of the Brexit referendum. England was the nation of the United Kingdom that contributed the highest number of votes in

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[69] The West Lothian Question calls for creating a devolved English parliament to legislate about English matters. In fact, Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish parliaments have the right to vote on decisions that concern England, while England has no right to vote on laws regarding the other nations. EVEL (English Votes for English Laws) was passed in 2015.

support of leaving the European Union. The Leave campaign exploited the idea of an English national and cultural reappropriation, instigating calls for a politicisation of England as a nation (Wellings 2019, 160). The concept of Englishness and English national identity thus become central to understanding Brexit. This topic is also mirrored in the literary production, which engages with the issue of English nationality at the heart of Brexit. This topic is analysed in detail in the last chapter of the present thesis.

All these intertwined causes and underlying reasons have contributed to Great Britain's exit from the European Union. It is essential to understand that the road to Brexit has been in the making for years:

> Brexit did not divide the nation, it merely revealed the inherent divisions within society. The referendum was the manifestation of more than three decades of Euroscepticism, resistance to mass migration from Eastern Europe and the Middle East, impotent rage regarding the eurozone crisis, and the corresponding failures of the left to either endorse European integration or acknowledge the values of modern patriotism. (Eaglestone 2018, 16)

The referendum exposed long-standing grievances concerning immigration, economic crisis, and the inability of party politics to engage with the electorate. Additionally, historical and cultural reasons played a pivotal role in the discourses during the Brexit campaign. The Leave side focused on the cultural aspects of the debate, advertising Brexit as a means to gain back political power and national independence. On the other hand, the Remain side based their propaganda on economic factors and bleak market forecasts (Habermann 2020, 3). Brexit rhetoric has appealed to feelings more than political arguments (Eagleastone 2018, 100)[70]: a potent tool that the Remain propaganda has neglected and that secured the victory of the Leavers.

After the referendum, the process of divorce from Europe was longer and more troubled than expected.[71] David Cameron and Nigel Farage resigned right after the

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[70] Eaglestone refers to Berlant's affect theory, particularly the concept of "cruel optimism". He argues that Brexit is the result of "cruel nostalgia", the self-destructive desire for something in the past. A similar idea has been proposed by Fintan O'Toole, who applies Snyder's definition of "sadopopulism" to Brexit. In both these theories, Brexit is seen as a self-harming action. See Robert Eaglestone, "Cruel Nostalgia and the Memory of the Second World War" in *Brexit and Literature*, 2018, and Fintan O'Toole *Heroic Failure*, 2018, Chapter 5.
[71] For a rough idea about the timeline see, for instance: Alasdair Sandford, "Post-Brexit Guide: What's been the impact – and how did it happen?", last update 10 March 2023, *Euronews*.

vote results. Theresa May became prime minister and, in 2017, she triggered Article 50, officially starting Brexit negotiations. It took three years to leave the EU, after many compromises and the resignation of May. Northern Ireland border rules are still at the centre of discussion:[72] a foreseeable problem completely neglected during the run-up to the referendum. Some economic consequences of Brexit have already started to emerge. Unlike in most other countries, trade levels in the UK failed to rebound after the pandemic (Romel 2022). Small businesses face much higher bureaucratic barriers (Foster 2022). The lorry drivers' shortage showed the problems the government had to face due to the new immigration rules and the drop in the numbers of European workforce.[73]

However, the most prominent consequences of the referendum have been social and cultural. Brexit is not only a political and economic phenomenon but is, significantly, a cultural event too (Eaglestone 2018, 1). British society has shown itself as profoundly divided. Right after the victory of the Leave side, the so-called Remainers asked for a new referendum. In response, they were called out by the Leavers as "enemies of the people" and "traitors" (Breeze, 2018).[74] The younger generation, who mainly voted to Remain and will have to deal with the long-term consequences of Brexit, felt betrayed by their parents and grandparents. Brexit caused calls for a new independence referendum in Scotland. It also triggered the risk of tensions along the border with the Republic of Ireland. The same Leave voters slowly realised that the promises made during the campaign were not being met and that the economic situation could worsen. Nigel Farage recently admitted that "Brexit has failed" (Farage qtd in Mcdonald 2023). Brexit showed "how quickly a country can degenerate into division and factionalism, and how tenuous are the bonds that hold us together around the vexed issue of national identity" (Coe 2019b). This divided, confused, and lost country is what British authors have depicted through Brexit novels in the last few years. In times of national upheaval, literature can be a potent medium to offer a different perspective on the discourse surrounding the nation. By exploring

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[72] In February 2023, Rishi Sunak reached a new deal with the EU on Northern Ireland trading arrangements. Even if the deal has been formally adopted, the North Ireland parliament still needs to approve it, as the DUP is openly opposed to it, and the elections of the Belfast parliament have been continuously postponed.

[73] For data, see *The House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts Report*, published in February 2021, which analyses the situation of the UK border after the Brexit transition.

[74] The expression "enemies of the people" was used in the headline of a *Daily Mail* article written by the political editor John Slack on the 4th of November 2016. The article attacked a ruling of the High Court of England and Wales that could potentially stop Brexit.

and breaking down the complex emotional underpinnings of the Brexit debate, literature can help to challenge and reshape the prevailing narratives. Narrative representation can evoke and deconstruct the "structures of feeling" that drive public sentiment and has the potential to generate new insights and promote a multifaceted understanding of the present national crisis.

2.2 Literary Landscapes of Brexit: The Emergence of the Brexit Novel

Brexit raised many questions regarding the political and economic consequences of leaving the European Union. In addition, the referendum ignited a debate about the identity issues at the core of the referendum. This prompted a reflection on the meaning of being British today and how it relates to cultural, historical, and political questions. The referendum thus became a catalyst for a deeper exploration of the values that define the British national identity and Great Britain's place in the world. After Brexit, the country felt the need to tackle the most urgent interrogations that the referendum uncovered. In this ongoing discussion, literature took on a fundamental role. The literary world debated with the political world, addressing the current crisis. Literature has always engaged with social and political matters (Kumar 2015, 168), and the examination of national identity has been a consistent topic among English novelists throughout the centuries.[75] Therefore, an important event, such as the choice to leave the European Union, had a substantial impact on the British cultural environment and drew the attention of many authors who were trying to understand the present moment (Coe 2018). Consequently, several novels that deal with the Brexit referendum, its causes, and its consequences appeared in the British literary landscape, earning the label of "Brexit novels". The overview of the purpose, the themes and the style of this subgenre is an indispensable prerequisite for identifying the characteristics that the Brexit novel inherits from Condition of England novels.

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[75] As Parrinder argues: "[f]irst of all, the nature of national identity has been consistently debated by English novelists across the centuries. Secondly, novels are the source of some of our most influential ideas and expressions of national identity. Works of art which are enjoyed and appreciated by subsequent generations play a key part in the transmission and dissemination of national images, memoires, and myths. Thirdly, the fictional tradition adds a largely untapped body of evidence to historical enquiry into the origins and development of our inherited ideas about England and Englishness." (Parrinder 2008, 6). The structural link between literature and the formation of English national identity will be investigated in Chapter 4.

Brexit novels are part of a new literary subgenre, BrexLit[76], which Kristian Shaw identified for the first time in 2018. In Robert Eaglestone's volume *Brexit and Literature. Critical and Cultural Responses*, Shaw defines BrexLit as: "Fictions that either directly or imaginatively allude to Britain's exit from the EU, or engage with the subsequent sociocultural, economic, racial or cosmopolitical consequences of Britain's withdrawal." (Eaglestone 2018, 15). The main form adopted in Brexit literature is the novel, a mode traditionally associated with the narration of the state of the nation in English literature. Nonetheless, other forms of BrexLit are worth mentioning, like poetry and playwriting. The poets Jackie Kay, Gillian Clarke, Imtiaz Dharker, and Benjamin Zephaniah have all produced works that engage with the referendum. Some of the most significant poetry collections about Brexit are Jane Commane's *Assembly Lines* (2018), Charly Bishop's *The Ballad of Brexit and Other Brexit Poems* (2018), and Vidyan Ravinthiran's *The Million-Petalled Flower of Being Here* (2019). These collections meditate on the power of language to heal wounds by considering different aspects of the Brexit moment. Similarly, various theatre productions have reflected on the Brexit referendum and its impact on British society. Some of the key works include *My Country* (2017) by Carol Ann Duffy and Rufus Norris, *People Like Us* (2018) by Julie Burchill and Jane Robins, *Brexit: A Play* (2018) by Robert Khan and Tom Salinsky, *Lear in Brexitland* by Tim Prentki (2017).

However, the Brexit novel has received more attention than any other form of BrexLit. Brexit novels engage with the contemporary situation in Great Britain to provide insights into society and give "an opportunity to understand the nuances of Britain's decision to leave the EU in a fictional world." (Ferguson 2019). Like the Victorian Condition of England novels, Brexit novels deal with a profound national crisis exacerbated by the referendum. Brexit novels serve a dual purpose of representing and criticising the inward-looking British society of the present time. They aim to shed light on the political and social implications of the Brexit referendum and explore the impact of this decision on a national and personal level. By doing so, the authors propose a counternarrative to the prevailing political climate and offer a new approach to the idea of belonging. Brexit novelists investigate the themes of class inequality, marginalisation, immigration, and national identity. They also seek to

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[76] The term "BrexLit" refers to "Brexit Literature", which includes all the literary forms that engage with Brexit, such as novels, poetry, and theatre. As anticipated in the introduction, in this thesis, I focus exclusively on the form of the Brexit novel.

challenge the simplistic and divisive rhetoric that has dominated the Brexit debate and present a more inclusive perspective on the issues at the core of the political discourse.

> BrexLit fictions betray a further purpose, gesturing towards more inclusive and diverse forms of public culture, identifying the social divisions affecting the nation, and engaging in a struggle with British society and its prevailing political climate. In this way, they espouse an outward-looking cosmopolitan engagement as a form of resistance to an increasingly nationalistic and inward-looking cultural landscape. (Eaglestone 2018, 28)

As Shaw argues, Brexit novels not only offer a critique of the current state of the nation but also provide a vision for a more just, hospitable, and compassionate society. In this sense, several Brexit novels are critical of the referendum's result, and the narratives often betray an aversion to Britain's contemporary political and social situation (Shaw 2021, 169).[77] Brexit novels have a mixed approach in the description of the present social and political crisis. Some novels, like *Perfidious Albion*, *The Wall*, or Ali Smith's cycle of novels, focus on exploring Brexit's political causes and outcomes. They address questions such as the democratic deficit of the nation, post-truth politics, and the mystifying rhetoric used in the campaign. In some cases, these themes are approached through a dystopian perspective, imagining the dire consequences of Brexit in the future. On the other hand, novels such as *The Cut, Ghost Wall,* or *The Lie of the Land* offer insight into private feelings and individual responses to the referendum's result. These novels engage with more intimate aspects of the contemporary political crisis, showing the effect of Brexit on a personal level.

At the beginning of the 19th century, Condition of England novels offered philanthropy and class sympathy as the most appropriate solutions for the contemporary social situation. In like manner, after the Brexit referendum, novelists felt the need to respond to the current political crisis and find a way to heal the national wounds. The narration of the Brexit event serves as a starting point to outline a broader sense of crisis gripping the country. Brexit novels expose the frailties of contemporary Britain and criticise the general lack of empathy and solidarity. The novelists, by and large, complain about the degraded state of the country. They condemn the political

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[77] As mentioned in the Introduction, one of the only Eurosceptic Brexit novels is *Kompromat*, by Stanley Johnson (Boris Johnson's father). The novels discussed in this thesis are all critical of the referendum.

elite for conducting a dishonest campaign and for exploiting economic grievances and disadvantages for their own gain. Brexit novels have become a means to express social and political opinions and criticise the corrupt political class. To the same extent, the Brexit novel functions as a medium to counteract the dominant narrative and offer an alternative image of the country. Through narrative representation, novelists seek to depict a multifaceted British identity, proposing various points of view. In the novels, different characters epitomise the diverse attitudes towards the present state of the nation. As a result, the portrayal of the national community is more composite, opposing the dichotomic image of Great Britain as divided into the crystallised identities of Leaver and Remainer. Moreover, a more nuanced understanding of the nation allows the creation of spaces of representation for the usually unrepresented, rejecting the nativist rhetoric of the Brexit campaign. Brexit writers employ the novel as a tool to imagine and shape a convivial Great Britain.[78] As in Condition of England novels, communication, affection, and empathy are offered as solutions to the atomised contemporary society, and a central role is given to personal agency. In Brexit novels, characters overcome their differences through personal and familial relationships. Feelings overpower divisions, which are often based on prejudices and ignorance. The representation of empathetic relationships and exchange on an individual level counters the image of the nation as divided into irreconcilable sides.

The depiction of the national divisions is one of the key themes in Brexit novels. The topos of the divided nation recurs in most of the novels, reflecting the ongoing political debate. In fact, social disparities have become a fundamental point of discussion after the referendum. The vote results revealed a fractured country and aggravated the sense of national conflict. Brexit novels highlight the divisions inherent in Great Britain, recovering the same dichotomies which underpinned the rhetoric of the "two nations" at work in the Condition of England novel. The theme of the divided nation is articulated from different points of view. Several novels depict class inequalities, which contributed to the disenfranchisement of the working class. The communication barrier between classes caused by ignorance and preconceived ideas

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[78] The concept of conviviality refers to Paul Gilroy's definition of the term as "the processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multiculture an ordinary feature of social life." The author argues that conviviality "does not describe the absence of racism or the triumph of tolerance" but offers an idea of community based on fluidity, openness, and respectful cohabitation. Conviviality "makes a nonsense of closed, fixed, and reified identity and turns attention toward the always-unpredictable mechanisms of identification." (Gilroy 2004, XI).

hinders the development of compassionate relationships. This is outlined, for instance, in Anthony Cartwright's *The Cut*, in which miscommunication prevents the creation of honest cross-class relations. The lack of understanding between different social groups is regarded as a major cause of the current state of the nation. In Brexit novels, authors often explore the notion of a divided nation by portraying stereotypical Leavers and Remainers, highlighting their differing stances on the Brexit debate. These novels depict a nation split between a progressive, multicultural faction and a more traditional, nationalist one. In novels like Johnathan Coe's *Middle England*, Sam Byers's *Perfidious Albion,* or Ali Smith's *Winter*, different characters epitomise the various faces of the nation. The choice of depicting a multifaceted England challenges the divisive and one-dimensional rhetoric of "Leavers vs Remainers", creating a more complex and layered representation of the nation. Brexit novels also explore the geographical disparity as another dimension of the national divide. As in Gaskell's Condition of England novel, the cultural and economic gap between the north and the south of England and London and the countryside is investigated in Brexit novels, such as *The Lie of the Land* by Amanda Craig. The author examines the structural divisions caused by geographical distance and highlights the central role of regional politics in determining social inequality.

Brexit novels consider the theme of social injustices and investigate the consequences of the class divide inherent in British society. The Brexit referendum provoked a renovated interest in the disenfranchised working class, labelled as the 'left behind'. Brexit novels focus on the representation of the working class, establishing a parallel with Condition of England novels. The marginalised poor resume their prominent role in contemporary literature, becoming the subject of narrative investigation. The left behind are often central characters in Brexit novels. The authors aim to show the consequences of class inequalities and social exclusion through characterisation. The political and economic disenfranchisement of the working class is seen as one of the leading causes of the contemporary state of the nation. The left behind voted in the majority to Leave the EU, a choice determined by a lack of trust in the government and the perceived absence of alternatives.[79] Brexit novels such as

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[79] As Matthew Goodwin and Oliver Heath argue in their analysis of the referendum voting patterns: "Our analysis of this vote has revealed how the 2016 referendum gave full expression to much deeper divides in Britain that cut across generational, educational and class lines. The public vote for Brexit was anchored predominantly, albeit not exclusively, in areas of the country that are filled with pensioners, low-skilled and less well-educated blue-collar workers and citizens who have been pushed

Antony Cartwright's *The Cut* and Niall Griffiths' *Broken Ghost* interpret the left-behind perspectives, recognising the reasons for their vote for Leave and exposing Britain's deep-seated classism.

The representation of the working class in Brexit novels entails an engagement with the immigration question. The left behind are often depicted as hostile towards immigration, as they feel threatened by the flux of workers from Europe and over.[80] The topic of immigration was pivotal in the referendum on Brexit, directly influencing the choice to leave the EU. The immigration issue has also been a central theme in literary works related to Brexit. The writers are mostly critical of the xenophobic and mystifying rhetoric of the Leave campaign, which framed immigration and the open borders policy as the main reason for Great Britain's economic and social problems. In response, novels such as Ali Smith's quartet or John Lanchester's *The Wall* propose a counternarrative on the immigration issue, configuring the possibility for a more hospitable nation. In doing so, Brexit novelists aim to challenge the narrative according to which immigrants burden the nation and portray more inclusive forms of national community based on social solidarity. Even so, often, the characterisation of migrant characters in Brexit novels tends to be marginalising and fails to create an empathetic identification with the foreign Other.

In Brexit novels, the concepts of hospitality, mutual understanding and authentic relationships are often expressed through the representation of female characters. In Condition of England novels, Margaret, Shirley, and Caroline mediate between masters and men, finding a way to bridge the gap between the classes. In the same way, contemporary characters such as Florence and Lux in Ali Smith's *Spring* and *Winter* are able to create meaningful relationships across the differences. These female characters manage to open the possibility for a dialogue between opposing

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to the margins not only by the economic transformation of the country over recent decades but also by the values that have come to dominate a more socially liberal media and political class. In this respect the vote for Brexit was delivered by the 'left behind'—social groups that are united by a general sense of insecurity, pessimism and marginalisation, who do not feel as though elites, whether in Brussels or Westminster, share their values, represent their interests and genuinely empathise with their intense angst about rapid social, economic and cultural change. Interestingly, our results also reveal how turnout in the heartlands of Brexit was often higher than average, indicating perhaps that it was citizens who have long felt excluded from the mainstream consensus who used the referendum to voice their distinctive views not only about Britain's EU membership but about a wider array of perceived threats to their national identity, values and ways of life." (Goodwin and Heath 2016, 331).

[80] The resentment of English workers toward Irish immigrants is a topos that emerges in several Condition of England novels, as well. Often, this hostility is expressed in rhetoric that recalls the one adopted by the Brexiteers during the referendum campaign. This comparison is explored in Chapter 3, section 3.5.

sides of the national divide, thanks to their position as outsiders and their different perspectives on society. Through their interactions with others, Florence and Lux break down the barriers that separate people to create a sense of community and closeness. These characters serve as powerful reminders of the importance of empathy, compassion, and mutual respect in building honest relationships and overcoming conflict and hate.

Another theme considered in the Brexit novel subgenre is the emergence of nativists and nationalist discourses linked to the idealisation of the past. The admiration for an alleged past of racial pureness and class harmony was fundamental to promoting an idea of England untethered from the "European yoke". This concept was central in the Brexiteers' rhetoric, as it combined nostalgia for a simpler past of imperial power and political supremacy with antagonism towards continental Europe. The Brexit novel recovers this kind of discourse in order to deconstruct and criticise it. *All Among the Barley* by Melissa Harrison and *Ghost Wall* by Sarah Moss, for instance, mirror the nostalgic and nativist ideas touted by the Leave campaign, exposing the violence and dangers they conceal.

Interestingly, the nostalgia advertised in the Brexit debate is connected to an English, rather than British, set of images. Englishness and national identity have come to the fore as pivotal issues during the referendum. This is reflected in the literary production, which engages with the question of national identity. Most Brexit novels are set in England and entail a typical English physical and mental landscape. Europe appears only as a distant element and is often not even mentioned, and the other nations of the United Kingdom are usually under-represented.[81] This reduced setting is a choice that requires careful consideration to capture why the idea of Englishness has been so crucial in the Brexit debate and how this has been mirrored in Brexit novels. Literature is a fundamental tool in the formation and representation of national identity (Parrinder 2008, 14). It is, therefore, essential to investigate in which ways Brexit novels engage with the idea of nation and, more specifically, with the idea of England.

Beyond a general thematic uniformity, Brexit novels present a wide variety of styles and genres. The subgenre includes dystopian novels such as *Perfidious Albion*

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[81] It is worth mentioning that there are some Brexit novels from Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. However, these are surprisingly less numerous and generally less prominent in the literary response to Brexit. For some examples of Scottish, Welsh, and Northern Irish Brexit fiction, see Kristian Shaw, *Brexlit: British Literature and the European Project*, 2021, Chapter 3, and Christine Berberich, *Brexit and the Migrant Voice. EU Citizens in Post-Brexit Literature and Culture*, 2023, Part II, Chapter 1.

or *The Wall*, crime novels such as *The Lie of the Land*, or historical novels like *All Among the Barley*. Moreover, every author employs language and narrative devices differently, allowing a varied approach to themes and motives. The writing style interacts with the subject, conveying the novel's message. For instance, Ali Smith's style, which is rich in metaphors, puns, and wordplay, expresses the author's idea that language and literature have the power to change the world. Language and reality have a strong and reciprocal influence on each other. Smith proposes imaginative writing and word creativity to oppose the reductionism of political rhetoric and build an inclusive and composite reality. Other authors, such as John Lanchester in *The Wall*, use language to communicate the opposite feeling. The dry and plain syntax in the novel serves the purpose of conveying the gripping hopelessness of a world at its demise, where language is unable to represent reality. At the same time, in novels like *The Cut*, Cartwright employs regional demotics for the working-class characters, proposing a realistic representation of the condition of the left behind.

Despite their differences, Brexit novels also share some stylistic similarities. In fact, Brexit novels record a renovated literary interest in politics and society and a revival of realism and traditional narrative modes. [82] Overall, the novels analysed in this thesis adopt a realist style, focusing on specific political events and entailing real-life characters. Moreover, Brexit novels detail the daily life and the social and cultural practices of the present historical moment, engaging with the contemporary social crisis. Realism is also attained through the employment of regional demotics, slang, and colloquial speaking, which confer a credible voice to the various characters.[83] The recovery of realism and plot linearity serves the purpose of representing and investigating an era of change, trying to grasp its meaning. In this respect, Brexit novels are comparable to the Victorian Condition of England novels, in which the authors employ realism to explore the poor's condition and consider the present social and political issues. In both cases, the narration of the present state of the nation is realised through the choice of a realist style.

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[82] As already exposed in the Introduction, Brexit novels can be inscribed in the new genre of the "hypermodern" or "metamodern" novel, illustrated by Raffaele Donnarumma's 2014 study and other studies on metamodernism (see Vermeulen & Van der Akker, 2010 and James & Seshagiri, 2014).

[83] For instance, Cairo in *The Cut* speaks the demotic of Dudley; in *Broken Ghost*, different characters use Welsh words, as well as slang; in *All Among the Barley*, Edith's grandfather uses a colloquial language, with grammatical errors. This technique creates linguistic mimesis, which grants a higher level of realism.

Various novels have been labelled as Brexit novels due to their engagement with the Brexit event, common themes, and realistic approach to narration. This is a yet developing and growing subgenre, and new examples of Brexit novels are being published daily, making it impossible to compile a complete list. For this reason, it has been deemed necessary to take into account a limited corpus of Brexit novels, choosing a time frame for the selected corpus. The Brexit novels that are considered in this thesis are Sam Byers' *Perfidious Albion* (2018), Amanda Craig's *The Lie of the Land* (2017), Melissa Harrison's *All Among the Barley* (2018), Sarah Moss's *Ghost Wall* (2018), Jonathan Coe's *Middle England* (2018), the "seasonal cycle" by Ali Smith (*Autumn*, *Winter*, *Spring* and *Summer*), John Lanchester's *The Wall* (2019), Anthony Cartwright's *The Cut* (2017), and Niall Griffiths's *Broken Ghost* (2019). These novels share the main themes, which were also the fundamental discussion points in the Brexit debate, pre- and post-referendum. These include the divisions inherent in the nation, the role of immigration, the disenfranchisement of the working class, the danger of nostalgia and the fracture between London and the rest, the city and the countryside. Similarly, all these novels are set in England and engage with the concerns about English national identity and their implication in the referendum results.[84] The thematic consistency between these novels has been one of the reasons for their inclusion in the corpus. Additionally, the recurring and significant themes of these novels can also be detected in Condition of England novels, making them suitable for comparison with the Victorian subgenre. The choice of the corpus is also based on the literary value of the novels. The selected literary works all received critical attention for their multifaceted approach to the topic of Brexit and for their engagement with the interrogations about the state of the nation. All the novels are also included in Shaw's seminal account of the BrexLit subgenre. Finally, the selection process also considers the range of genres and perspectives among the novels. The purpose is to present a comprehensive overview of the different modes of representation and investigate the complexity of the literary response to the Brexit event.

Ali Smith's *Autumn* (followed by three more instalments of the series) is considered the first Brexit novel. The cycle focuses on identifying the idiosyncrasies

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[84] Ali Smith is a Scottish writer, but interestingly, her Brexit novels are all set in England (except for the final chapters of *Spring*, which are set in Scotland) and focus on the correlation between English identity and the Brexit event. On the contrary, *Broken Ghost* by Niall Griffiths is set in Wales and considers the referendum's impact on the Welsh nation. The choice of including this novel in the corpus will be substantiated later.

and distortions of contemporary society, of which Brexit is the most evident outcome. Other novels engage with the same purpose, investigating the reasons behind the present crisis. *Middle England*, *The Lie of the Land*, *The Cut* and *Broken Ghost* explore the circumstances that gave rise to the current social conflicts and examine the problems resulting from a deeply divided society. The consequences of Brexit are brought to their extremes in the dystopian interpretations of Sam Byers in *Perfidious Albion* and John Lanchester in *The Wall*. These novels engage in dialogue with the present while envisioning a bleak future. On the contrary, *All Among the Barley* and *Ghost Wall* are set in the past, using the historical perspective to highlight the dangers of contemporary tendencies. All these novels engage with Brexit through different approaches, creating a composite literary answer to the political event. The narration of this moment of crisis is tackled from a multifaceted perspective, giving reason for its complexity. The study of these novels allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how literature communicates with society, playing a pivotal role in the representation of the state of the nation. The following sections introduce the chosen corpus, paying attention to the novels' main themes and stylistic features. This is relevant to the comparison between the Brexit novel and the Condition of England novel, which is delineated in the next chapter. The two subgenres share several similarities concerning the novels' themes, purposes, and style. It is, therefore, important to identify these elements in the selected Brexit novels.

2.3 Ali Smith's Seasons and the Dream of a Borderless World

Autumn by Ali Smith is considered the first Brexit novel, published just a few months after the referendum.[85] Ali Smith is a well-established Scottish writer known for her experimental writing style, which playfully connects self-reflective language to contemporary political issues (Germanà and Horton 2013, 16). Her works address several themes, such as the encounter with the Other, the role of borders in contemporary society, the need for empathy and human connections in a highly technological society, the postmodern motifs of the power of language, the instability of the self and the blurred limits between real and imagined. Although her style and themes reflect a postmodern sensibility, her concerns with ethical questions align her

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[85] The author had already planned the quartet before the referendum. She requested more time from her editor to include Brexit's impact in her narrative (Smith, 2019b).

work with the modernist tradition (Germanà and Horton 2013, 20). She writes novels that effectively combine form and content, endowing literature with a political purpose. Smith "considers the novel to be a 'revolutionary form' that reflects on and pushes social changes." (Farkas 2017). The same function is attributed to *Autumn*, the first instalment of a cycle of four novels, which engages with the Brexit moment and its significance in present-day Britain. Smith puts into her writing a direct criticism of the fractured contemporary society and its obsession with borders. The idea that grounds the quartet is that affection, common humanity, and mutual understanding are the only means to resist the atomisation of society. This concept echoes the solutions for resolving class conflict proposed by Condition of England novelists during the early Victorian era. In Condition of England novels, as in Ali Smith's seasonal quartet, personal relationships can solve social division.

Ali Smith's four novels are sometimes referred to as the "seasonal cycle" or "seasonal quartet". The novels *Autumn* (2016), *Winter* (2018), *Spring* (2019), and *Summer* (2020) present different stories and are not sequels to one another, but they share some recurring characters, images, and themes. The choice of writing a cycle of novels reflects the author's belief in a circular concept of time and history.[86] This idea is also substantiated by the rich pattern of references to different works of literature from every epoch, which indicates the "unavoidable interconnection – among things, places and, most importantly, human beings." (Alessio 2020 152).[87] In the quartet, the use of citations and self-reflective language is endowed with a political purpose. For Smith, literature should challenge the limits imposed by tradition, endorsing the power of imagination and creativity as a counternarrative to the dominant narrow-minded political discourse. The four books share the same "elastic structure" (Garner 2019). Even if it is realistic in mode, her style is playful and versatile, mixing genres, voices, and narrative levels. The plot line in the four books is continuously interrupted by

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[86] The novel cycle genre is closely tied to the depiction of the English nation. It's noteworthy that during times of crisis and identity issues, writers like Smith and Coe have chosen to use the novel cycle genre to engage with the Brexit moment (*Middle England* is the third instalment of a trilogy). The Victorian age also saw the popularity of series of novels. One of the earliest and most well-known series of English novels is Anthony Trollope's *Chronicles of Barsetshire*, which was published between 1855 and 1867.

[87] The idea that art speaks a universal language that transcends space and time is also reflected in the choice of engaging, in every book, with a different female visual artist. The four artists are: Pauline Boty, a pop artist famous for her collages (*Autumn*), the modernist sculptress Barbara Hepworth (*Winter*), the visual artist Tacita Dean (*Spring*), and the film director Lorenza Mazzetti (*Summer*). Like Smith, these artists use experimental forms of expression to deconstruct stylistic conventions (see Conway 2020).

sharp insights into the dreams and memories of the characters, as well as excerpts from their diaries, tweets, and monologues from unknown entities that create an overlapping of perspectives. By establishing connections between characters, situations and feelings, Smith reveals the potential for new forms of political recovery through the power of literature. Smith's composition includes an alignment of aesthetics and ethical imperatives, an optimism of renewal, and a sense of simultaneously occupying multiple positions (Shaw 2021, 213).

Autumn starts with a riff from Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*: "It was the worst of times, it was the worst of times" (2017, 3), pointing at the time of turmoil that is the setting for the story. The plot of *Autumn* revolves around two characters: the elderly Daniel Gluck and his young neighbour Elisabeth Demand. The story of their unusual friendship is set in the background of a changing country, where the vote for Brexit shows its first consequences. There are frequent shifts between the present time – in which fences are being built, and racist graffiti is appearing around the city – and Daniel's and Elisabeth's memories. The relationship between the two neighbours is a clear response to the divide affecting society: the symbol of how borders (in this case, borders separating two gardens) can unite rather than separate. Hospitality and friendship are opposed to the ongoing social conflict. Daniel urges Elisabeth to "always try to welcome people into the home of your story" (Smith 2017, 11) against the narrow-mindedness of the politicians and the inhabitants of the village where they live. The novel depicts the division between hostility and hospitality in contemporary British society (Shaw 2021, 209). Shaw argues: "As Smith's polemical stance makes clear if good fences make good neighbours, then the need for cosmopolitan hospitality becomes an urgent necessity in a post-Brexit world." (Shaw 2021, 209). In *Autumn,* Smith already poses the themes that are at the basis of the seasonal quartet. She criticises the contemporary xenophobic and nationalist tendencies and pushes for a more open society in which borders are porous and human relationships are more important than political divisions. Through literary representation, Smith proposes an alternative discourse on the present state of the nation, endorsing a sense of community and hospitality against the prevailing political climate.

In *Autumn*, Smith focuses on the Remainers' point of view on Brexit. On the contrary, in the subsequent novel, *Winter*, the writer represents two characters who stand for the opposition between Leave and Remain. Iris and Sophia are two sisters who get together during Christmas, with Sophia's son Artur (called Art) and an

unknown girl named Lux, who will be the glue that keeps them together. Sophia is a retired businesswoman; her sister Iris is a political activist, and their relationship is complicated. The narration is often interrupted by glimpses of the political background, referencing the ongoing refugee crisis, the Grenfell Tower fire, the rise of Donald Trump and the proliferation of fake news (Shaw 2021, 209). The novel directly mentions Shakespeare's *Cymbeline,* "a play about a kingdom subsumed in chaos, lies, power-mongering, division and a great deal of poisoning and self-poisoning" (Smith 2018, 200). This reference is an allusion to the state of post-Brexit Britain: a lost nation, at war with itself, unable to heal its internal divisions. The country's situation is mirrored in the fractured family at the centre of the story. The representation of the family as a reflection of the state of the nation is a recurring topos in literature, employed, as well, in several Condition of England novels. The contrast between the two sisters in *Winter* parallels the tumultuous social and political circumstances, which reveal deep fissures in the national community. In the same way, at the end of the novel, Sophia and Iris are reconciled, thus epitomising the possibility of a dialogue between the two opposite sides of the Brexit debate.

In *Winter*, Ali Smith also engages with the theme of fake news and post-truth politics, focusing on social media and their ambivalent role in politics today. Twitter is seen as a way of spreading false information but also as a medium capable of offering a counternarrative to the ongoing political discourse. In the novel, this stance is represented by Art's decision to switch his "nature" blog from apolitical to political. The name of the character implies the message that art should be political. For Smith, artists and novelists have the duty to get involved with the current political situation, commenting on the present time of "immense political ferment" through the means of art (Smith qtd in Elkins 2019). Thanks to Lux, Art undergoes a process of awareness about the world that he ignored for so long. Lux's name is evocative of her role as a metaphorical light of conscience for the other characters, blinded by their interests and problems. As will be analysed, the character of Lux, a foreign and mysterious girl, is a trope in Smith's narrative, which is also recovered in *Spring*, the third instalment of the quartet.

The representation of a disrupted country assumes a bleaker turn in *Spring*. Here, Smith depicts the reality of an IRC (Immigration Removal Centre), where illegal immigrants are detained indefinitely. The narration is interposed by disconnected cries against social networks, xenophobia and other "contemporary dangerous tendencies"

(Alessio 2020, 159). Richard, a TV director who is grieving the loss of his mentor, and Brittany, a young IRC employee, find themselves on a train to Scotland, the first to kill himself and the second following a mysterious child, Florence, who appears capable of passing borders and fences without any consequences. Like Lux in *Winter*, Florence is capable of bringing awareness and enlightenment to the people she meets (Jordan 2019). On their arrival in Scotland, Brittany and Richard discover the plot of an organisation helping immigrants. Florence is involved with them to help her illegal mother. *Spring* is the most explicit and polemical of the four novels (Jordan 2019), as it directly criticises Britain's immigration policies and the general state of the country. The novel openly confronts the themes of Otherness and hospitality. It also engages (like all the four books of the cycle) with the concept of borders and their possible role as places that unite rather than separate. Brittany epitomises Great Britain itself and expresses Brexiteer's ideas. Florence temporarily breaks Brittany's defences with her pureness and creative imagination. Brittany's encounter with Florence opens her to the possibility of hospitality, even if only temporarily. The ability of a single character to mediate between opposing viewpoints and encourage compassion and mutual understanding is a fundamental theme in Ali Smith's novels. This is also detectable in several Condition of England novels, where female characters function as mediators between national divides.

The final instalment of Smith's seasonal cycle is *Summer*, published in the summer of 2020. The novel depicts the story of the Greenlaw family and points out how Brexit penetrated private lives and divided households. Sacha and Robert's parents have separated due to their conflicting opinions on Brexit. As usual in Smith, the personal situation is related to the political one, including the spreading of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pain and confusion provoked by Brexit, and reflected in the Greenlaws' bitter divorce, is exacerbated by the Coronavirus crisis. Furthermore, certain characters from the series' previous chapters reappear, such as Art, Elisabeth, and Daniel. Daniel, on his death bed, remembers his youth, revealing a painful episode of his past. He was imprisoned in a concentration camp for German citizens in Great Britain at the beginning of the Second World War, unmasking the heroic rhetoric about WWII that permeated the Brexit campaign. Daniel's story epitomises the intimate link between the past and the present and the frequent impossibility of differentiating between them. Daniel's imprisonment in the concentration camp is mirrored by the story of Hero, a Vietnamese prisoner detained in the same IRC represented in *Spring*.

These continuous intertextual references, which connect the whole cycle, indicate that the past and the present are part of the same continuum and that to understand one, we must understand the other.[88] The return and overlapping of times and characters throughout the four novels become a prominent feature in *Summer*, gesturing toward the circularity of seasons.

Ali Smith's seasonal novels are among the most complex and interesting examples of Brexit novels. They promote social progress and offer an alternative narration of the state of the nation. Smith's cycle opposes the hostile and narrow-minded political discourse with the representation of characters epitomising the possibility of a more open-minded and hospitable society. The seasonal quartet is a powerful testament to the power of literature to inspire critical thinking, empathy, and positive change. Through her novels, Ali Smith advocates for social change, recovering the same ambition of Condition of England novelists. Moreover, the seasonal novels share various themes with the previous subgenre, such as the depiction of the national divide, the encounter with the Other, and the characterisation of female characters as mediators, as is analysed in the third chapter of the thesis. Some of these topics are also at the core of other Brexit novels, which, however, engage with the Brexit event through a dystopian perspective.

2.4 Towards a Brexit Dystopia: *Perfidious Albion* and *The Wall*

While Ali Smith's novels, even if interposed with dreams and memories, are realistic in mode, some Brexit novels, such as Sam Byers's *Perfidious Albion* (2018) and John Lanchester's *The Wall* (2019), adopt a dystopian viewpoint.[89] With its unknown outcomes, Brexit stimulated these authors' fantasies. Byers and Lanchester interpret the current crisis and imagine its future effects. Their novels depict a pessimistic portrait of British society where the consequences of Brexit and exclusionist foreign policies have been brought to the extreme, eroding civil liberties and increasing social inequality and xenophobic sentiments. Through the representation of a bleak prospect, the authors criticise the nation's current state and advocate for the creation of a better

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[88] As Alex Preston argues: "It's no coincidence that Einstein features prominently in this final instalment." (Preston 2020).

[89] Dystopia is a literary genre which describes in detail a society that does not exist and that the author considers worse than the society in which he lives. Through dystopian novels the authors want to make the reader aware of the dangers behind certain contemporary social trends. For the definition of dystopian fiction See Lyman Tower Sargent, "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited", 1994.

future, pushing the readers to react. *Perfidious Albion* and *The Wall* share themes such as post-truth politics and the exploitation of nostalgic and nationalistic rhetoric, focusing on how the Brexit campaign was conducted (Alessio 2020, 144).[90]

Perfidious Albion is a political and satirical novel that contains several dystopian elements. Byers challenges readers to picture a world in which fear is deliberately used to control people (Everitt 2021, 136). The novel is set in Edmundsbury, a small village that symbolises England, where technology multinationals and social media control society. In Edmundsbury, tech giant Green is trying to control the town's infrastructure in agreement with the construction company Downton and the local politicians. The story focuses on different characters, taking a different point of view in each chapter. Their stories intertwine so closely that it is almost impossible to discern a protagonist or a linear plot: the idea is that of a tangle of threads that connects characters but simultaneously makes relationships between them difficult. Two characters, Trina and Darkin, represent two apparently irreconcilable fronts of the nation, embodying the different perspectives that emerged during the referendum. Alfred Darkin epitomises the Leave side, expressing nationalist and backward ideas, while Trina stands for the Remain side, which is cosmopolitan and multicultural.[91] The national division is crystallised into the opposing identities of Leaver and Remainer and is expressed through the characterisation of Trina and Darkin. The representation of contrasting characters, who embody the divide within the nation, is recovered from the tradition of the Condition of England novel. In fact, in both subgenres, the use of a dichotomic characterisation enables a discussion about the state of the country, separated between different forms of identification.

What characterises *Perfidious Albion* as a Brexit novel is the attempt to describe a feeling, a mood. The author commented in an interview: "I think it's fair to say at this point that Brexit is a feeling as well as an event, and that was one of the questions I was interested in when it came to writing the book." (Byers 2019). The themes on which the narrative focuses are all connected to the Brexit event: the manipulation of the media by politicians, the emotional response of people to certain

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[90] Political manipulation is also at the centre of the political thriller *Kompromat* by Stanley Johnson (Boris Johnson's father). At the centre of the story is Russia's plan to influence the Brexit referendum result, trying to extend the power of the Russian president over the Western world. The novel has not received any attention from the critics, but it is worth mentioning because it is one of the few Brexit novels that sides with Leave.

[91] The characterisation of a divided nation through these characters will be better analysed later.

events, the critique of the cultural elite, and the portrayal of conflicting views of Englishness (Alessio 2020, 173). One of the novel's main themes is the pervasiveness of media in contemporary life and their ability to shape the political landscape. Through tabloids, Twitter, and Facebook, media communication has been essential in manipulating the Brexit campaign. The ability of some politicians to exploit these media was largely responsible for the result of the referendum. In the novel, this is epitomised by the politician and journalist Hugo Bennington, whose populist rhetoric is directly derived from Leave propaganda. Hugo tries to redirect the anger of the left behind (represented in the novel by Larkin) towards immigration, Europe, and the liberal elites. Larkin, isolated and desperate, believes in Hugo's misleading promises, becoming the victim of his political greed. The exploitation of the working class by mischievous political leaders is also a topic in several Condition of England novels, where ill-intentioned trade unionists drive poor people to protest with the promise of a better life. Finally, the novel explores the use of nostalgia as a political tool linked to an exclusive English identity. The centrality of the idea of Englishness in the Brexit rhetoric and Brexit novels is a fundamental point of discussion in the present thesis. The longing for a lost past and the celebration of traditional English symbols are also examined in another dystopian Brexit novel, *The Wall* by John Lanchester.

The Wall depicts a dark and dystopian future world.[92] The story is set in the future when climate change (in the novel simply referred to as the Change) has caused the sea level to rise. Beaches have disappeared, and only a few countries have maintained a liveable environment while people from all over the world are fleeing their homes to find refuge elsewhere. The British government tries to protect its borders from water and climate refugees (called, significantly, the Others), building a huge wall surrounding its coasts. The protagonist, Joseph Kavanagh, is a Defender forced to guard the Wall.[93] The novel depicts the bitterness he feels, like all the young people, towards the previous generation, which is held responsible for not having prevented the Change. Generational conflict is a topic that emerged during the Brexit campaign. Generally, younger people voted for Remain and felt betrayed by the older

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[92] John Lanchester is famous both for his fictional and non-fictional literary productions. The last novel he wrote, *Capital*, in 2012, engaged with the post-financial crash in London. *The Wall* is his first dystopian novel.

[93] The Wall, the Defenders, the Others are all references to *A Song of Ice and Fire* by George R. R. Martin. In this fantasy saga, the Defenders stand watch on the extreme northern border of the invented land of Westeros, protecting its inhabitants from the monstrous Others.

generations for having caused the exit from the EU. In the novel, all young people are required to spend two years on the Wall, where they face extreme cold, boredom, and the danger of being sent to sea. This is precisely what happens to Kavanagh and his companions, who suddenly pass from Defenders to Others. A change in the rhythm of the narration accompanies the shift of perspective. From the immobility and inanity of the Wall, the narrative pattern becomes fast and full of adventurous twists.

The Wall focuses on the consequences of a climate disaster, but it can be considered a Brexit novel for its preoccupation with the question of borders. Although the author insists that the Wall is "not a metaphor for anything else" (Lanchester qt in Allardice 2019a), the resolution to close the borders is predominant in much of the political agenda of the most recent years. The Brexit campaign has been based on the promise to eliminate the open border policy, effectively reducing immigration. The theme of immigration is also fundamental in Lanchester's novel. *The Wall* provides an engaging counternarrative to Brexit's xenophobic discourses. The dichotomy between "us" and "them", Defenders and Others, is deconstructed when the two roles are reversed, and the protagonists become the dangerous aliens. Lanchester expresses a harsh criticism of the intolerant rhetoric perpetrated by the government towards immigrants. In the novel, politicians depict the Others as threatening the country's safety, appealing to the same fear of invasion exploited by the Leavers' propaganda. This rhetoric is also connected to a nationalist discourse. The concern over the arrival of the Others is attached to a sense of national pride and the desire to preserve an invented English tradition. The nostalgia for detrimental forms of Englishness is another central theme in the novel. In a world hit by climate collapse, the need for certainties urges a growing sense of identity linked to a safe and untainted past of traditions. This idea echoes the present crisis, where the feeling of loss and confusion felt by many people led to the fabrication of an idealised English national identity, which focused on the past rather than the future. Similarly, in the early Victorian era, Condition of England novels represented the nationwide perception of living in a moment of crisis. Some Condition of England novelists, like Disraeli or Brontë, appealed to romanticised images linked to a traditional idea of Englishness. In like manner, they mention the need to preserve England's identity against a supposed invasion. Unlike in Lanchester's novel, this idea is not problematised in the Condition of England subgenre. In *The Wall*, the author represents the risks of exclusionary and

xenophobic ideas, highlighting the arbitrary and unstable line that divided the "us" and the "Others".

The Wall and Perfidious Albion are two Brexit novels set in a future that is worse than the present. In their representations, contemporary tendencies have been brought to their extremes, creating a society based on fear, hate, and struggle. The dystopian mode of narration allows authors to reflect on the present without directly engaging with it. Both authors are critical of the contemporary social situation and envision a bleak prospect for the country. By representing a hypothetic future, these novels outline the dangers of post-truth politics and xenophobic and nationalist rhetoric. Other Brexit novels, instead, confront the everyday consequences of Brexit and depict the current situation and its problems. Authors such as Jonathan Coe, Amanda Craig, and Anthony Cartwright investigate the direct costs of Brexit on a personal level, reflecting the current social and political climate.

2.5 Mapping Brexit in *The Lie of the Land*, *The Cut*, and *Middle England*

One of the many protagonists of the Brexit debate was the city of London. The capital is the biggest metropolis and the financial and cultural centre of Great Britain. The economic and cultural distance between London and the rest of the country has increased in the last few years.[94] The referendum results have shown this same fracture: London had the biggest return of votes for Remain (75,3% in the City of London), while the majority voted Leave in the rest of England (with exceptions in the main university cities). The Brexit vote shocked Londoners who lived in the so-called "London bubble", unaware of the restlessness spreading across the rest of the nation. With its long tradition of multiculturalism and the significant flows of people and money running from and to Europe, London has lived the last 30 years in a consistent privilege. As Zadie Smith argues in *Fences: A Brexit Diary* (2016), wealthy Londoners often tend to "lecture the rest of the country on its narrow-mindedness while simultaneously fencing off its own discreet advantages" (Smith 2016, 27). Londoners' shocked reaction after the vote for Brexit demonstrated a lack of awareness about the general discontent. Moreover, the widespread stereotype that the Leave voters were

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[94] In 2016, London's total nominal Gross Value Added represented 22.7 per cent of the UK's total GVA in 2016, up from 22.5 per cent in 2015 and 18.5 per cent when going even further back to 1997. See the report by the Greater London Authority, "Regional, sub-regional and local gross value added estimates for London, 1997-2016", 2018.

ignorant and racist bigots contributed to an increased sense of distance. Many Brexit novels have encapsulated the dichotomy between London and the rest or, using Raymond Williams' categorisation, between the country and the city.

The Lie of the Land (2017) by Amanda Craig captures the deep differences between London and the rest of England. The novel's main characters are Quentin and Lottie, a married couple who, due to the economic crash, have lost their jobs and cannot afford to divorce. They decide to move with all their family to the countryside in Devon to live in an old cottage and save money. The removal to a village in the middle of nowhere is a shock for the family members, who get to confront a profoundly different lifestyle. However, while Quentin loathes Devon, Lottie comes to appreciate life in the cottage and finally accepts a job in the village, moving there indefinitely. Xan, Lottie's mixed-race son from a previous relationship, initially struggles to fit in, facing the racism of the villagers who think he is an illegal immigrant. He gets a job in the local pie factory, in close contact with Polish immigrants and disenfranchised local workers. The characters are all intertwined by an underlying mystery involving the cottage where Lottie and Quentin live. Craig's style is engaging and easy to follow. The author wisely mixes the description of rural and domestic life with the tense action of a thriller.

Through the puzzled perspective of this family of Londoners, the author explores the significant chasm between two opposed parts of the country. Craig argues that: "This is a novel about two very different sides of the nation, especially the forgotten people of the provinces often sneered at or sentimentalised by those living in cities." (Craig, "Overview"). The author strongly criticises the way the countryside is often portrayed in popular culture. She argues that such representations tend to be limited and misleading, as they either depict the countryside as a marginalised and backward site where ignorant people live or as an idyllic and romantic landscape devoid of harshness or complexity. These stereotypical images of the countryside not only fail to acknowledge the diverse experiences of rural life (in the novel epitomised by the midwife Sally) but also perpetuate harmful myths and prejudices that can further alienate and marginalise rural communities. *The Lie of the Land* deconstructs these simplistic representations of the countryside, engaging with a multifaceted and truthful depiction. The novel interpretation of the wealth and cultural differences within the nation draws from the tradition of the Condition of England novel, recovering the same themes and underlying tension of Gaskell's *North and South*. Moreover, the author

engages with the theme of immigration, describing the conflictual relationship between the migrants and local workers, a theme which is also detectable in Gaskell's novel. For Craig, it is necessary to challenge the misconceptions about the English countryside to promote a more inclusive idea of the national community. Lottie's final decision to settle in the village explores the possibility of a more genuine relationship between the country and the city.

The meeting between a Londoner and an "outsider" is at the centre of Anthony Cartwright's *The Cut* (2017). The book was commissioned by the editor Peirene Press specifically to address the Brexit moment and "build a fictional bridge between the two Britains that have opposed each other since the referendum day." (In Cartwright 2017, 1). The story is a Brexit-time *Romeo and Juliet*. A "forbidden" love grows between the London journalist, Remain-voter Grace, and the working-class Leaver Cairo. Cartwright dramatises the division between cosmopolitan and nationalist identities, giving voice to the two opposite sides of the nation after Brexit (Shaw 2021, 183). The novel draws on Disraeli's trope of the "two nations", featuring a contrasted love story as well. *The Cut* is divided into chapters titled "Before" and "After", highlighting the centrality of the Brexit vote as a game-changing moment. The story's setting is Dudley, in the Midlands, one of the places most affected by deindustrialisation and one of the cities with the highest votes for leaving the EU. Cartwright describes the inhabitants of this region (the so-called Black Country) as tired and angry with the financial elite in London. They feel disenfranchised and abandoned by Westminster. Cairo himself is represented as unable to let go of Dudley's industrial past, clinging to the symbols of that declined era. The author investigates how nostalgia can encourage a return to nationalistic stances as a defence mechanism from poverty and socioeconomic disparities (Shaw 2021, 184).

The encounter between the two protagonists draws attention to their intense feelings of distance and distrust stemming from preconceived opinions. The linguistic gap accentuates the divide between Cairo and Grace. Cartwright uses the regional dialect of the Black Country for his Dudley characters, countering it with the Standard English used by Grace. The use of the demotic emphasises the communication difficulties between the two characters and, metaphorically, between Leavers and Remainers. The regional dialect is also employed in Condition of England novels, such as *North and South*, to accentuate the cultural gap between the "two nations". Moreover, in the Condition of England subgenre, the choice of the demotic serves the

purpose of depicting a realistic image of the working class. Similarly, Cartwright's mimetic language realistically conveys the voices of the left behind. Despite the linguistic and cultural distance, Grace and Cairo grow fond of each other, and their relationship deconstructs their previous stereotyped ideas. Cartwright's novel offers, in this way, the hope for the possibility of a dialogue, suggesting that personal relationships and feelings have the potential to overcome any division. However, the tragic ending outlines how miscommunication and deep-seated resentments are hard to fight, preventing the likelihood of successful encounters.

The representation of a different perspective from the London-centric one is also the principal subject in *Middle England* by Jonathan Coe (2018). The novel is the sequel to Coe's two previous books, *The Rotter's Club* (2001) and *The Closed Circle* (2004), featuring some of the same characters. The story spans from 2010 to 2018 and portrays all the steps that brought Great Britain to the present moment, satirising the main socio-political events seen through the lens of the characters' lives. The novel captures the spirit of the time, "deconstructing a febrile national landscape" (Shaw 2021, 190) and depicting a complex portrayal of the country. Coe chose the West Midlands as the location to showcase "the features of a deeply divided nation" (Clément 2021, 3).[95] This setting allowed him to present both sides of the Brexit argument as it developed outside London. The representation of the national divide is conveyed through the various characters of the novels, which epitomise the contrasting sides of the Brexit country. The multifaceted characterisation consolidates the image of a fractured British society (Shaw 2021, 195). The multiple storylines investigate the close connection between personal lives and political events. The narration of the nation through individual situations is a fundamental feature in the tradition of the State of the Nation novel, of which the Condition of England novel is an eminent example. *Middle England* is aligned with this tradition, engaging with the Brexit moment through his characters' stories.

The concept of "middle England" is commonly used to refer to conservative, middle-class voters who strongly identify with traditional English culture. The centrality of the idea of Englishness in the Brexit discourse and its relevance for the referendum results is a fundamental theme in the novel. A topical moment in the story is the depiction of the opening ceremony of the London 2012 Olympics. The event

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[95] The region, with the exception of Birmingham, voted for Leave in the 2016 referendum.

features all the "quintessence of Englishness", provoking in the characters different feelings: from national pride to mockery to a weird sense of identity and unity. The novel's characters embody various visions of Englishness. *Middle England* engages with multilayered discourses of Englishness and long-lasting questions about English national identity. Coe wishes to deconstruct stereotyped images of England (particularly Middle England) through narrative representation of alternative forms of identity. The novel's exploration of this topic is analysed in the last chapter of the thesis.

All these novels portray the present moment, capturing the years before and after the referendum. Through the personal stories of the many characters, the different authors paint a portrait of contemporary England, trying to explore the causes and consequences of Brexit. The novels criticise the atomised society in which even personal relationships (marriage, family, friendship) fail to heal the deep fracture that runs through the country. Brexit revealed the country's social, regional, and cultural divisions, sharpening a sense of loss and isolation in the people. There is no given solution, but through narrativisation, these authors propose alternative perspectives, offering a multifaceted portrayal of the nation. Recognising and acknowledging the differences is an essential step towards creating a society that values them. While this awareness may not solve the issues, it can foster acceptance and appreciation for diverse experiences. This concept is central to understanding the purpose of Brexit novels and how they communicate with contemporaneity. However, some Brexit novelists choose to reflect on the present through the lens of the past, pushing the focus further in order to see its borders clearer. Melissa Harrison and Sarah Moss write about a past that mirrors a convulsed present, investigating the roots of nostalgia and violent nationalist discourses through narration.

2.6 Looking Back: *All Among the Barley* and *Ghost Wall*

The Brexit discourse exploited British history to create the fearful image of Great Britain at risk: facing the dangers of mass immigration, having to abide by EU strict regulations, and losing economic and cultural power. The rhetorical use of nostalgia was fundamental to establish a comparison between an idyllic past and a corrupted present. This kind of comparison is often used in the political and cultural discourse to denounce the present issues, looking at the past as an example for the future. Literature

has exploited this nostalgic representation of national history to advocate for change.[96] Examples of this practice are detectable in Condition of England novels. For instance, Disraeli worships the English tradition and the integrity of the political institutions of the past, in contrast with a chaotic and degraded present. In the Brexit debate, the idealisation of an invented past of independence and safety tapped into nationalist and xenophobic feelings, fuelling the fear of invasion and the need to protect Great Britain against European interference. Unlike Condition of England novels, some Brexit novels consider and criticise the political exploitation of nostalgia, deconstructing the revivalist discourses in vogue. Melissa Harrison's *All Among the Barley* (2018) and Sarah Moss's *Ghost Wall* (2018) are two Brexit novels set in the past, and they investigate the dangers of nationalistic and nostalgic rhetoric.

All Among the Barley is set in a small village in East Anglia in 1933. The novel's setting in the past allows the author to engage with contemporary issues through the lens of history. The choice of the year 1933 is functional to the discussion, determining a comparison between the Brexit moment and the years in which fascism was spreading through Europe. The author's purpose is to demonstrate how exclusivist and racist discourses easily create the premises for the development of oppressive policies (Ferguson 2019). Edith Mather, a 13-year-old girl who loves reading, is the narrator and protagonist of the novel. She is a farmer's daughter and helps her father and brother work in the fields at Wych Farm. The detailed and lyrical description of natural elements characterises the narrative style: plants, animals, and sounds are filtered through Edith's childish voice. The depiction of the bucolic environment is interspersed with the realistic representation of the harshness of rural life (Craig 2018). The recession and the shortage of hands due to the men lost in the First World War affect the family's stability, and Edith's father has to sell the farm. The arrival of an unexpected character breaks the repetitive life in the village.

Constance FitzAllen, a charming journalist from London, is looking to write some articles about "the old ways", documenting rural practices that are slowly disappearing due to the mechanisation of the work. She looks at the past with longing, judging everything new as threatening the English purity and traditions. Her desire to

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[96] Raymond Williams, in *The Country and the City* (1973), already notices how English literary products of every epoch tend to refer to a better past. This "Golden Age" (that was never real) is believed to be more innocent and happier and is always compared to a corrupted present (see *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams, chapter 4).

return to idyllic pastoral times is connected to a nationalist discourse that venerates the English countryside. Her idea of England is the same as advertised in the Brexit populist rhetoric: white, proud, and independent. Constance blames Westminster and the government and demands independence from the international finance system and "a new sense of national identity and pride" (Harrison 2018, 139-140). Constance's attachment to the cultural practices and values of old England fuels a call to action for the recovery of the state of the nation. Her nationalistic discourses also involve the exclusion of those who are different, in this case, a family of Jews residing in an abandoned building in the village. Her rhetoric is efficient, and she finds the right public in the disenfranchised farmers (Shaw 2021, 201). In fact, Constance supports a local group of fascists and manages to convince the people from the village to adhere to it. Harrison investigates through narration the dangerous influence of nationalism and nativism on the most fragile individuals and marginalised communities. The novel provides a warning about the dangers of these ideologies and their potential to undermine the values of inclusion, diversity, and emancipation, highlighting the ways in which they can lead to division, conflict, and a loss of individual and collective agency. The tragic finale further supports this interpretation. Wych Farm burns, and Edith goes mad and retires to a mental health facility.

The same themes are explored in *Ghost Wall* by Sarah Moss, which is set right after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The story takes place during a summer archaeological camp in Northumberland. The seventeen-year-old Silvie and her family are joining a university group of students led by Professor Slade. They are re-enacting the living habits of Britons during the Iron Age. The narration is conducted in the first person, from Silvie's perspective. The style is concise, and the story is condensed into only one hundred thirty pages, which are "plot-driven, time-limited, and entirely out of the ordinary" (Crown 2018). The novel shows how nostalgic and nativist beliefs promote violence. Moreover, it engages with the idea that abuse and prevarication are ever-present in human history, spanning across all eras and civilisations. This concept is epitomised in the narrative structure of the novel. In fact, the prologue describes a human sacrifice taking place in the Iron Age. The novel closes on a similar scene from the present times, like a circle, outlining the repetition of historical violence committed on the most fragile individuals. Bill, Silvie's father, is obsessed with British history, and he is also abusive and aggressive. He distrusts immigrants and "wanted his ancestry, wanted a lineage, a claim on something." (Moss 2018, 37). He cultivates the

illusion of returning to a past when the English blood was pure. Bill's desire to resurrect the past and his sense of possession towards his daughter peak at the end of the novel when, with Professor Slade and some other students, they tie and hurt Silvie to recreate a human sacrifice. Silvie is saved by the only female student in the group, who manages to call the police. Moss denounces how the erroneous worship of the British past can result in the use of outdated practices of violence and abuse (Shaw 2021, 204). The novel portrays the dangers of idealising an invented past of ethnic purity, patriarchal control, and national pride. The criticism is towards the nativist tendencies that surfaced from the Brexit campaign and the nostalgic rhetoric exploited by the Leave parties.

The two novels share similar themes and invite caution against the risks of nostalgia and all attempts to resurrect the past. In both stories, the narrator is a young girl. The choice of voice is intentional, as the two narrators propose an alternative to the dominant discourses around the state of the nation. Edith and Silvie have a deep connection to their heritage and land, but they do not uncritically idealise the past. At the same time, they are victims of patriarchal and nationalist ideologies. Their characterisation creates a space of representation for the victims of exclusionary national discourses, expressing the point of view of the marginalised categories. Giving them a voice through narration is an important political act of reappropriation aimed at creating a counternarrative about national identity. In this way, the novels contribute to the political debate about the nation, addressing contemporary social issues and imagining different approaches to the idea of the nation. Literature's engagement in the national discourse is crucial to understanding how subgenres such as the Brexit novels and the Condition of England novels interacted with their contemporaneity, shaping a response to questions about English identity. However, England was not the only nation of the Kingdom which found itself confused and angry. Wales also voted to leave the European Union, a choice that revealed deep unresolved anxieties about the nation's place in the Union and its historical ties to England. The Welsh condition at the time of Brexit is explored in the novel *Broken Ghost* by Niall Griffiths.

2.7 The Welsh Perspective in Niall Griffiths' *Broken Ghost*

The relationship between the four nations of the United Kingdom turned out to be a salient issue in the aftermath of Brexit. The referendum results questioned already fragile bonds, highlighting the unstable nature of the British superstate. England and Wales voted to Leave, while Scotland and Northern Ireland returned a majority of votes for Remain. Moreover, during the Brexit campaign, the debate almost exclusively focused on an Anglocentric perspective, effectively excluding the other nations from the political discussion. The Brexit discourse focused on the relationship with Europe, obliterating the impact that the exit from the EU could have in different parts of the country. Interestingly, Scottish, Irish, and Welsh voices are also generally missing in the post-Brexit literary production. Novels that consider the Brexit moment are mainly set in England and expose an English point of view on the question. Niall Griffiths' *Broken Ghost* (2018) is a noteworthy exception. The novel considers the disenfranchisement of the Welsh working class and the worsening of its condition following the Brexit referendum. Unlike the other novels analysed in the thesis, *Broken Ghost* distances itself from an Anglocentric focus.

The choice to include this novel in the corpus is due to Wales's unique position in the Brexit referendum. The victory of the Leave side in Wales caused a lot of bewilderment. The nation had received significant funding from the EU, and the Welsh political leaders were staunchly pro-Remain (Shaw 2021, 102). Significantly, the poorest and most disenfranchised parts of Wales supported Leave, an interesting analogy with the left-behind areas of the Midlands and North England. As in the English regions, the vote for Brexit was motivated by economic deprivation and inequalities, becoming a cry against the establishment and the London-centric liberal elites. Additionally, Wales is experiencing a long-lasting identity crisis comparable to the English one. The marginalisation of Wales inside the Union and the troubled devolutionary process[97] outline unresolved anxieties regarding the elusive concept of Welshness, also caused by the century-old affiliation with England (see Kumar 2003, chapter 3). Therefore, the study of a Welsh Brexit novel allows a parallel with the exploration of the Brexit moment from an English perspective, tackling similar themes and underlying tensions.

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[97] In 1979, Wales held a first devolution referendum, which failed to accomplish the formation of a Welsh assembly. More than 79% of electorates voted against devolution. A second referendum in 1997 granted the devolution of Wales, with a narrow 50,3% of votes in favour.

The question of Welshness and Wales's devolution is a fundamental theme in Niall Griffiths' novels. In his previous work, the author considers how devolutionary processes affected Wales, representing the political consequences of Thatcherite policies and the inability of New Labour to heal economic divides (Shaw 2021, 104). In *Broken Ghost,* Griffiths offers a bleak portrait of the margins of Welsh society. His protagonists are perfect representatives of the left behind. The author denounces the government's political exploitation of the most fragile strata of the population, aggravated by Brexit. The criticism towards contemporary social divisions is open in Griffiths, who, through one of the characters, clearly points his fingers against the government and Brexit:

> The politicians blether on about the great new opportunities for Britain outside of the EU. Endless shit. And in all the fuckin job centres up and down the land not one thing changes. In all the bedsits, in all the pokey flats at extortionate rents, at all the foodbanks…the same fuckin thing goes on. The crying and the pleading. The fucked up children. The fuckin air is thick with it. (Griffiths 2019,137-138)

In this passage, the author condemns the false promises made during the Brexit campaign and highlights the still-existing economic inequalities. The novel depicts the opposition between those in power and the common people. The story's protagonists are among the powerless: Emma, a sex-addicted single mother living on benefits; Adam, an ex-junkie still helping at the rural rehab facility where he recovered; Cowley, an ignorant thug, prone to violence (probably caused by the child abuse he endured). The novel starts when the three witness a ghostly vision on the top of a hill. They see a luminous female shape, and Emma also hears the words "dig", "bridge", and "wild". After seeing the ghost, the three experience a short period of inner peace and a feeling of relief from their problems, just to relapse into their old bad habits and find themselves more isolated than ever. Meanwhile, Emma's tweet about the vision has caused a disparate group of people to start a camp in the same place where they experienced the hallucination. The creation of this community signals the potential for alternative forms of belonging based on hospitality and sharing.

The novel interposes chapters in which the characters speak in first person, often using slang, Welsh, and swear words, to highly lyrical descriptions of nature and to chapters that reproduce online comments and tweets. The choice of using the Welsh

demotic and the first-person narration allows for a realistic portrait of the characters, proposing their unfiltered perspective. The novel's main theme is the representation of the working class or left behind. *Broken Ghost* portrays the consequences of sociocultural marginalisation and economic precarity, depicting an atomised and individualistic society which neglects its most fragile members. Griffiths' faithful portrayal of the left behind is reminiscent of how working-class individuals were depicted in Condition of England novels. Similarly, the three protagonists in *Broken Ghost* find relief from their condition through the experience of solidarity and a sympathetic community. In the same way as the poor in Condition of England novels, the characters in Griffiths' novel undergo a form of spiritual redemption, even if not in Christian terms (Warner 2019). The novel criticises and problematises the present social situation, highlighting how Brexit exacerbated the individualistic tendencies in British society, but it also offers a counternarrative to the idea of community, gesturing towards a more inclusive national identity.

Through narration, Griffiths and the other Brexit novelists advocate for the reconciliation of the national divisions intensified by Brexit. The purpose of Brexit novels is to represent the contemporary moment and to identify the social, political, and cultural issues at the core of Brexit. At the same time, literature becomes an instrument for understanding the present crisis, recognising and trying to solve the identity questions it poses. The idea that literature can relate to society is also fundamental in the Condition of England novel subgenre, which engages with politics and promotes social change. Not only do Brexit novels and Condition of England novels share the same purpose, but they also develop from a similar historical context and consider similar themes. These first two chapters explored the political and social background of the subgenres, which is essential to understanding the way in which the novelists reflect on their contemporaneity. Moreover, they proposed an overview of the selected corpus, highlighting the fundamental themes of the novels. In the subsequent chapters, the thesis investigates the comparison between Brexit novels and Condition of England novels, focusing on the common themes. The analysis considers, in particular, the representation of the nation as divided, the depiction of the left behind, the role of women as mediators, the confrontation with the foreign Other, and the centrality of the question of Englishness and English national identity in the two subgenres. The chapters emphasise how Condition of England novels and Brexit

novels interpret these themes to address a moment of political, social, and cultural crisis.

CHAPTER 3

From Social Change to Narration: Intersecting Themes in Brexit and Condition of England Novels

> We can overcome division
> Only by refusing to be divided.
> It is a personal decision
> But then a social action.
> (Williams 1973, 306)

3.1 Condition of England Novels and Brexit Novels: a Comparison

After introducing the two subgenres of the Condition of England novel and the Brexit novel, this chapter considers the parallels between their themes. Through close reading and textual analysis, the chapter identifies the presence of a set of themes in both subgenres. Condition of England novels unite realistic accounts of the life and working conditions of the poor with melodrama. In the novels, the gap between the rich and the poor is bridged through good sentiments and compassion. The sentimental solution proposed avoided social revolution and condemned the violent response of the Chartist movement, stressing the role of individual responsibility in creating personal relationships. The primary purpose of this thesis is to substantiate the hypothesis that contemporary Brexit novels adopt a similar sensibility. Recent literary investigations assessed a renewed interest in representing reality in contemporary literature. Through different narrative styles, writers nowadays employ literature as a medium to interpret and analyse society and personal experience (Donnarumma 2014, 61). Brexit novels aim to represent contemporary British society and its idiosyncrasies. At the same time, whether these writers recover the sentimental solution offered in Condition of England novels remains an open question. This thesis enquires about this question through the analysis of a corpus of Brexit novels and the comparison with Condition of England novels. In Brexit novels such as Coe's *Middle England*, Smith's seasonal quartet or

Griffiths' *Broken Ghost*, the fractured social tissue is healed thanks to the creation of meaningful relationships and attention to familial bonds, hinting at the possibility of building a sense of community and belonging. This idea endorses Robert Eaglestone's argument that BrexLit plays a crucial role in understanding how society works and how individuals live in society, broadening the reader's ability to think, feel and argue (Eaglestone 2018, 2). Through the comparative analysis of the two subgenres, the chapter aims to investigate how Condition of England and Brexit novels engage with a range of themes, thus validating the hypothesis that both subgenres respond to social questions in similar ways.

The most significant similarity between the two subgenres is the representation of the British nation as divided. The national fractures depicted in the novels run along the lines of class and geographical distance and outline the diverse nationalist or cosmopolitan forms of identification. The first section of this chapter accounts for the various approaches to the narration of national divisions in Condition of England novels and Brexit novels. First, the section considers the class division embedded in British society since the nineteenth century and examines the metaphorical concept of "two nations" as portrayed in Disraeli's *Sybil, or the Two Nations*. The idea of the "two nations" shapes all subsequent production of Condition of England novels, such as *Hard Times* and *North and South*. Correspondingly, Brexit novels like *Middle England*, *Winter*, and *The Cut* also explore the same theme. All these novels share a common thread – the root cause of the divide is a lack of communication and mutual understanding between the different sides. Therefore, the solution lies in building better human relationships and promoting empathetic communication between all parties.

Empathetic encounters are also fundamental in repairing geographical divisions, as both Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* and Amanda Craig's *The Lie of the Land* show. These two novels are similar in many ways, even if they were written in different periods. Both entail the movement of the protagonists from an idealised home to an unknown part of the country. In the two novels, the protagonists' feelings of estrangement at the encounter with the "provincial Other"[98] and the final adaptation

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[98] As argued in the Introduction, the term "Other" is borrowed from a range of postcolonial theories, which include E. Said, H. Bhabha, and G.C. Spivak. However, the meaning of "Other" can be expanded to embrace further processes of Otherisation, which encompass the "colonial" and "racialised" Other while mirroring its position of marginalisation and discrimination. In this case, the term refers to the

to the new environment exploit similar narrative devices. Adopting Raymond Williams' theoretical framework, the analysis of the two novels shows how, in moments of significant social changes, fixed identities linked to territory become fundamental in fostering social divisions. At the same time, the two novels push for a deconstruction of these exclusive territorial identities in favour of new forms of national unity.

The second section engages with the representation of the working class in the two subgenres. Starting from Brian Elliott's comparison between the social movements in the early Victorian period (such as Chartism) and contemporary forms of populism, this part of the thesis accounts for the presence of working-class characters in Condition of England novels and Brexit novels. The depiction of working-class living and working conditions is central to Condition of England novels and is specifically geared to offer an empathetic portrait of this unknown and often stigmatised social group to push for awareness and compassion in the reader. Similarly, Brexit novels such as *Broken Ghost* and *The Cut* entail left-behind characters, offering a less biased picture of the disenfranchisement of the working class in contemporary Britain.[99] Even if they sometimes recur to an "orientalising" perspective on the poor, the two subgenres give a voice to an often-neglected part of the population.

Similarly neglected and voiceless in Victorian times and in the Brexit debate, women become the perfect mediators between the different sides of the nation. Through the analysis of five female protagonists – Margaret, Shirley, Caroline, Lux, and Florence – the third section investigates the hypothesis that women characters are often appointed the role of social mediators. Their position as outsiders/insiders, in fact, allows them to reach both sides of the divide. Thanks to honest communication and their ability to play with language, these characters expose the possibility of creating meaningful relationships and accommodating different points of view.

The last section tackles the silencing of migrant voices in Condition of England novels and Brexit novels. Comparing different examples from the two subgenres (such as *North and South*, *Sybil* and *Hard Times*, *Autumn*, *Middle England* and *The Lie of*

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process of othering people who live in rural or provincial areas or any other location considered periphery in opposition to a centre.

[99] To engage with the representation of the left behind, I draw on James Morrison's extensive study, *The Left Behind: Reimagining Britain's Socially Excluded*, 2022.

the Land), it explores how these literary works recover stereotyped representations of migrants. These novels absorb stigmatising language from the media, and they simultaneously tend to silence migrant characters, which are often flat and exist only in relation to their British counterpart. Some Brexit novels, instead, deconstruct these stereotypes and enable a meaningful identification with the foreign Other. The representation of migrant characters, such as Lux and Florence in Ali Smith's *Winter* and *Spring*, are examples of the possibility of representing migrant characters with a strong agency in the story. Similarly, John Lanchester's *The Wall* considers the concept of borders and offers a tentative relativisation of Otherness. The novel combines the threat of invasion with the idealisation of a residual past and depicts the celebration of an exhausted national identity. The concept of nostalgia linked to representations of the nation is the starting point for the following chapter.

3.2 "A fence here, a wall there": the Representation of a Divided Nation

The referendum for Brexit has revealed the divisions inherent in British society. The two opposite sides, Leave/Remain, signalled a deep fracture in the country that concerned social, economic, and, more prominently, cultural distance. The referendum results showed a country divided almost in half: Leave marginally won, with 52% of the votes against 48% for Remain. As Shaw argues, Brexit was not the cause of the country's division: it simply made visible pre-existing social, cultural, and political grievances (Shaw 2021, 167). Many statistical studies conducted after the vote showed how Great Britain was divided not only between Leavers and Remainers but also along the lines of age, education, class, and geography (see Hobolt 2016). Generally, older, less educated, and poorer people voted to Leave, while younger, well-educated people voted to Remain.[100] Moreover, rural and industrial areas supported leaving the EU, in opposition to the main cities, especially London. The vote also revealed differences between the four nations of the kingdom, with England and Wales returning a majority of votes for Leave and Scotland and Northern Ireland for Remain.

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[100] "Going from A-level education to an undergraduate degree reduces the probability of voting Leave by about 10 percentage points, all other things being equal. Similarly, a 50-year-old is 10 percentage points more likely to support Brexit compared to a 33-year-old voter. Men are slightly more likely to vote Leave (2 percentage points), as are those with lower incomes and those who feel that their financial situation has deteriorated." (Hobolt 2016, 1269).

These fractures resonate in the cultural discourse. The perception of a deep gulf between those who voted Leave and those who chose Remain permeates the cultural production from 2016 onwards. Literature, as well, has recovered this dichotomic image of the nation. The representation of the national divide is fundamental in Brexit novels, which address the referendum and its consequences. The novel *Autumn* by Ali Smith is considered the first Brexit novel, and it powerfully describes an irremediably split Great Britain:

> All across the country, the country split in pieces. All across the country, the countries cut adrift.
> All across the country, the country was divided, a fence here, a wall there, a line drawn here, a line crossed there,
> a line you don't cross here,
> a line you better not cross there,
> a line of beauty here,
> a line dance there,
> a line you don't even know exists here,
> a line you can't afford there,
> a whole new line of fire,
> line of battle,
> end of the line,
> here/there. (Smith 2016, 60-61)

While all the characters of this novel stand for the Remain side, the story's background is a country at war with itself. The nation is breaking into pieces. The author underlines the presence of borderlines inside the country. The constant repetition of the word "line" marks the obsession with boundaries and restrictions that, for the author, characterises contemporary Britain. Smith criticises the preoccupation with the question of borders, which was central in the Brexit debate. In the novel, this is epitomised by the continuous mention of different kinds of edges, limits, and perimeters. These borders are not only physical (fences, walls) but primarily mental. It is the line that divides here and there, Leavers and Remainers, Great Britain and the rest of Europe. Many Brexit novels offer a dualistic representation of the British nation that appears divided between opposite ways of life: one metropolitan, open to multiculturalism, and the other more backward and nationalist.

One way of depicting national divisions in novels is by contrasting characters that epitomise conflicting sides of the country. Often, these characters are from different social classes or parts of England, pointing out how class and geography are pivotal in differentiating social responses to political problems. Literature becomes the fundamental ground to sublimate national differences and create a fictional dialogue between the country's components. Condition of England novels and Brexit novels represent their contemporaneity, engaging with the state of the nation and the most urgent social and political issues. These novels aim to reflect and mirror reality but also try to understand these issues' root causes and propose solutions to overcome them. Therefore, it becomes essential to investigate how literature and novels can communicate with society and contribute to social and political discourses. This idea was fundamental in the production of Condition of England novels. The authors believed that,

> The novel as a genre was a greatly suitable medium not only for articulating social ideas, but also for orchestrating the social debates and affecting the general production and circulation of social knowledge, and that it was particularly important at a time when such knowledge seemed wanting in the face of massive social change. (Knezevic 2011, 102)

During times of significant social change, the novel can be a powerful tool for expressing social and political beliefs and fostering public discussions on the most urgent matters. Therefore, novelists in the early Victorian age took it upon themselves to promote the debate through narration in order to comprehend the changes and their impact on society. Representing the national divisions becomes a way to articulate the present social situation and address its critical issues.

The depiction of Great Britain as a divided nation has been present in literature since long before Brexit. As Charles Dickens maintains in one of his journal articles, the early Victorian age was a period "when so wide a gulf has opened between the rich and the poor" and to "understand whose hands are stretched out to separate these two great divisions of society" had become fundamental (Dickens 1842, *Letters* 3: 278-285). Literature was considered central in fulfilling this function. In Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil or The Two Nations,* the "two nations" of the title are, significantly, the "Rich and the Poor" who "are as ignorant of each other's habits, thoughts, and

feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones or inhabitants of different planets" (Disraeli 1845, 79). The rich and the poor are so diverse that it is like they come from two different nations.[101] They cannot understand each other and ignore their respective living conditions. The inability to communicate is considered the leading cause of class division: "Between the poor man and the gentleman there never was no connection, and that's the vital mischief of this country." (Disraeli 1845, 165). Rich and poor people are utterly separated, and the industrial society exacerbates the atomisation of the national community. At their first encounter, Stephen Morley warns Egremont that:

> "There is no community in England; there is aggregation, but aggregation under circumstances which make it rather a dissociating, than an uniting, principle." […] "It is a community of purpose that constitutes society," continued the younger stranger; "without that, men may be drawn into contiguity, but they still continue virtually isolated." "And is that their condition in cities?" "It is their condition everywhere; but in cities that condition is aggravated. A density of population implies a severer struggle for existence, and a consequent repulsion of elements brought into too close contact. In great cities men are brought together by the desire of gain. They are not in a state of co-operation, but of isolation, as to the making of fortunes; and for all the rest they are careless of neighbours. *Christianity teaches us to love our neighbour as ourself; modern society acknowledges no neighbour.*" (Disraeli 1845, 77-78, italics mine)

The advent of industrialisation and the mechanisation of society aggravated the sense of isolation. Morley argues that in modern society, people live in overcrowded cities, in close contact with each other, but there is no real closeness or cooperation; there is no mutual help between neighbours, only indifference. Industrialisation and urbanisation contributed to the dissolution of a sense of community in favour of ruthless individualism. England's "two nations" are divided and unable to connect on a meaningful level. In Disraeli's novel, this division is represented in two ways. First, the main characters, Sybil and Egremont, symbolise respectively the people and the aristocracy. Secondly, the national fracture is epitomised through the stylistic choice of juxtaposing scenes that show rich scenarios next to poor ones (Adams 2009, 91-92). The indolence and viciousness of the aristocracy are opposed to the suffering and

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[101] The "Otherisation" of the poor is a topos in several Condition of England novels. This concept will be analysed in the next section.

animosity of the poor. These alternating backgrounds allow for the presentation of different characters from the "two nations" and create a variegate portrait of British society at the time.

Through his decision to reach the other side of the divide and build a meaningful relationship with the poor, Egremont demonstrates that the gulf between the two nations is not unsurmountable and that a clear-cut division is impossible. As Sybil finally realises: "The characters were more various, the motives more mixed, the classes more blended, the elements of each more subtle and diversified, than she had imagined." (Disraeli 1845, 331-332). This final realisation makes clear that social conflicts are caused by mutual ignorance and that sympathy and reciprocal understanding can favour a respectful relationship between the poor and the rich. Morley's view of the nation as utterly divided is deconstructed. Trafford's benevolent capitalism and Egremont's genuine interest in helping the poor in Parliament show a possibility of overcoming the gap between rich and poor (Schwarz 1974, 28).

Most of the Condition of England novels dramatise the strong divisions within the British social classes and, in particular, the clash between capital and labour, a central issue during the early Victorian period. Gaskell's *North and South*, Dickens's *Hard Times*, and Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* focus on the conflict between masters and hands. At the beginning of all these novels, masters and hands are incapable of communicating, and they cannot recognise their common humanity. The conflict generated between them and the possibility of their reconciliation through sympathy is often favoured by the presence of a third personage, a woman usually, who works as a mediator, as is analysed in a subsequent section. Social conflicts are ascribed to mutual ignorance between the classes, so their resolution can be achieved by creating honest and respectful relationships between individuals without recurring to any large social transformation (Adams 2009, 91). In the novel *North and South*, the relationship between Thornton and Higgins illustrates the conflict between capital and labour. The issue at hand is that the masters are reducing wages without providing an explanation to the workers, who decide to rise in rebellion. The inability of the two parts to communicate as fellow humans appears to be the cause of the strike and, therefore, of the violence. Margaret comments: "'I don't know – I suppose because, on the very face of it, I see two classes dependent on each other in every possible way, yet each evidently regarding the interests of the other as opposed to their own…'" (Gaskell 1854, 113). Even if the two classes are co-dependent, they refuse to collaborate and

help each other. Personal encounter is the only solution to foster sympathy. For Margaret, the relationship between masters and men should not be configured as between capital and labour but as "a man, dealing with a set of men" (Gaskell 1854, 116). When Thornton finally decides to speak to Nicholas Higgins, his worker, as a man and not a master, they manage to find common ground. Through the act of sharing a meal, their relationship is equalised, the implication being that, even if strikes happen again, they will not be as violent as before. This feeling of mutual respect "enable(s) both master and man to look upon each other with far more charity and sympathy, and bear with each other more patiently and kindly." (Gaskell 1854, 418). Individual relationships are, therefore, seen as the solution to class conflict.

Romance is also seen as a possible answer. The dramatisation of a love story between two different faces of the nation is a central topos in Condition of England novels. In *Sybil*, for instance, Egremont, the progressive aristocrat, and Sybil, the pious daughter of the people, get married at the end of the novel. The disruptive power of this union is weakened by the fact that, at the end of the story, Sybil is discovered to be of noble origins. However, their marriage symbolises the possibility of the aristocracy becoming the guide and protector of the people, a central concept in Disraeli's political philosophy. In Condition of England novels, the final marriage does not entail the union between two different classes (they usually involve middle-class characters, more or less modest), but it epitomises a union of different ways of seeing the world. In *North and South*, the marriage between Margaret and Thornton exemplifies the compromise between the sentimental (Margaret) and the rational (Thornton) approach to human relationships. As Raymond Williams argues, the tension between the two different perspectives is worked out by the marriage between the two characters, which "serves[s] as a unification of the practical energy of the Northern manufacturer with the developed sensibility of the Southern girl" (Williams 1968, 92). The result is a new attitude to human relationships devoted to sympathy and honest communication. *Shirley*'s romance works in a similar way: the hard-hearted Moore discovers compassion thanks to the attention of the kind Caroline. Love, good feelings, and sympathy can solve the divisions in the country without resorting to any radical change in society.

Condition of England novels set the paradigm for the representation of the divided nation, a theme that resurfaced strongly in many Brexit novels. The idea of two opposing parts (roughly represented by the Leave and Remain sides) being unable

to overcome their differences is paramount in several novels that deal with the present moment. The mutual ignorance of the ways of living and the problems of communication between the "two nations" are seen as one of the leading causes for the actual state of the nation. The most prominent way to develop the theme of the divided nation in Brexit novels is through the characterisation of the stereotypical Leaver and Remainer, outlining the different approaches to some central themes in the Brexit debate. These novels present the image of a nation torn between an open, multicultural, and culturally progressive part and a nationalist and backward one. The encounter between opposed stances is often the narrative starting point of Brexit novels. The conflict and possible reconciliation between the characters are the main pillars of the narrative structure of the subgenre. One example is Sam Byers's *Perfidious Albion*. In the novel, the main plotline follows the story of two characters: Trina and Darkin. Trina is the epitome of the Remain voter. She is a young woman of colour who is also queer and is at ease with the new technologies and social media. She is part of a changing world that she understands and embodies. On the other side, we find Darkin, an old, isolated man who lives his life confined to his home. Darkin exemplifies the left behind. His only channel of communication with the world is *The Record*, a xenophobic and populist newspaper which depicts an image of Great Britain as invaded by immigrants. Even if apparently opposites, these two characters are two faces of the same coin: both end up being victims of the greed of the political and economic elite. This elite is represented by the character of Hugo Bennington, a caricature of UKIP leader Nigel Farage, who exploits a nostalgic and nationalistic idea of England for his electoral interests. Hugo's propaganda and the schemes of the tech giant Green actively perpetuate a sense of conflict between Darkin and Trina. In this way, *Perfidious Albion* demonstrates how in-group dynamics between "Us" and "Them" can be manipulated easily and quickly by political representatives (Shaw 2021, 177).[102]

A similar narrative device is employed in other novels as well. In Ali Smith's *Winter*, the second instalment of her seasonal quartet, the main characters are two sisters, Sophia and Iris, who have opposite world views. Sophia is a retired businesswoman who thinks that Brexit was "a vote to free our country from inheriting

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[102] The same author comments how: "Both Remain and Leave became surprisingly inflexible identities for people [. . .] which helped them make more straightforward sense of what up to that point might have been quite complex political positions" (Personal Correspondence 2020).

the troubles of other countries, as well as from having to have laws that weren't made here for people like us by people like us" (Smith 2017, 206). Iris, instead, is a political activist who believes that there is not a "them" and an "us" but "just an us" (Smith 2017, 106). The two sisters embody the divisions in the country. The metaphor of the divided family as a representation of the divided nation is also used in other Brexit novels, such as Johnathan Coe's *Middle England*. In the novel, Benjamin's father, Colin, is emblematic of the left behind: he is an old white man who used to work in a car factory that was demolished to make space for a shopping centre. He is unable to recognise the world in which he is living, and his last act before dying is to vote for Leave. Benjamin is, instead, an intellectual who, after Brexit, decides to leave England and move to France to open a writing school. His niece, Sophie, also exemplifies the Remain side as she is a lecturer in art history, and she marries Ian, a driving instructor whose ideas are more in line with the Leavers. Their opposite views on Brexit are the root cause of a marital crisis.

Literature often uses the idea that the family functions as a microcosm of society. In Brexit novels, as in Condition of England novels, the family mirrors the internal divisions in British society. The chance of overcoming these divisions is made possible through personal feelings and sympathy and focusing on the importance of familial relationships. In *Hard Times*, for example, all the marriages are as corrupted as the society around them. Coketown, the city symbolising the industrial utilitarian society, has nurtured individuals deprived of human compassion. This is reflected in the abusive marriages of all the characters in the novel (Paroissien 2008, 398). The only character who ends up with a satisfying marriage is Sissy, who is endowed with imagination and a good heart. However, redemption can come through those same ruined family bonds. Louisa finds her way out of her horrible husband in her father's arms, and Gradgrind rediscovers the importance of family and love. This hints at the possibility of overcoming moral corruption and finding human compassion, even in the middle of a heartless society, thanks to individual affection.

The focus on familial relationships as a mirror to reflect on society at large and its moral corruption has been widely exploited in Brexit novels: sisters who do not talk to each other, marriages failing due to opposite views on Brexit, and the generational divide between fathers and sons. At the same time, these relationships can also determine the possibility of bridging the gap and overcoming differences, as represented in both *Winter* and *Middle England*. Iris and Sophia find common ground

when reminiscing about their past and understanding how vital their affective bond has been in their lives. Sophie and Ian decide to give a chance to their marriage, and at the end of the novel, they have a "beautiful Brexit baby", a "tentative gesture of faith in their equivocal, unknowable future" (Coe 2018, 416). Failed marriages become a potent metaphor for Brexit, which was adequately labelled as a "divorce" from Europe.[103] The reconciliation between Ian and Sophie can be read as a hope for a future reconciliation between the UK and the EU. Even if the process requires compromise, understanding, and a willingness to listen to each other's concerns, Ian and Sophie's ability to overcome their differences represents a "gesture of faith", pointing to the importance of human relationships in the contemporary individualistic society. Amanda Craig's *The Lie of the Land* employs a similar narrative, which starts with the impending divorce between Quentin and Lottie and ends up with their decision to live together and give a chance to their family, even as their divorce is finalised: something which can be hoped for Britain and Europe too. If the family is a mirror of society, personal attachment and mutual understanding can be an answer to the atomisation of the national community. Looking at our neighbour through empathy and common feelings is offered as a solution to create a united and compassionate society.

Similarly, in Anthony Cartwright's *The Cut*, the representation of cross-class romance hints at the possibility of a resolution of social conflict. *The Cut* is set in the Black Country, one of the places that returned the highest number of Leave votes and suffered more from austerity policies. The deindustrialised landscape serves as a reminder of the deep class inequalities in British society (Shaw 2021, 183). The social break recalled by the title is depicted through the characters of Grace and Cairo. Grace is a London journalist standing for the Remain side, while Cairo is an ex-boxer from Dudley who works precariously as a labourer and intends to vote for Leave. Throughout the novel, the distance between one side and the other, "us" and "them", is continuously marked:

> *You people*, is what struck her. That and the anger that flickered for a moment in
> his eyes, her own anger ignited briefly. *You people*, these judgements. She was

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[103] Several newspapers and tabloids used divorce and marriage-related lexicon and metaphors when referring to Brexit. See, for reference, Denise Milizia and Cinzia Giacinta Spinzi. "When a relationship ends "there can be no turning back". The divorce metaphor in the Brexit discourse." (2020), and Julia Landmann and Yannick Ganz. "Recent metaphors of Brexit in the British press: A linguistic analysis based on the Financial Times." (2023).

not so blind to herself to realize it might have been her own prejudice reflected back at her. *You people. These people.* (Cartwright 2017, 14, italics in original)

The distance between the well-educated and progressive Grace and the disenfranchised Cairo embodies the one between the two sides of the nation: "*These people. And this is how it began, she supposed, prejudice on the scale of a whole country.*" (Cartwright 2017, 10). They see each other as the enemy and blame each other for society's problems. The impoverished working class of the Black Country directs their anger towards the political and cultural elite of London (epitomised by Grace). This conflict is aggravated by the inability of the cultural elite to see the pain of these communities and the prejudice, coming from the media, that the vote for Leave was only fuelled by anti-immigration feelings: "'All you people want to say is that it's about immigration. That we'm all racist. That we'm all stupid. You doh wanna hear that it's more complicated than that. It lets all of you lot off the hook. Never considered the problem might be you.'" (Cartwright 2017, 13-14).[104] Even if the relationship between Grace and Cairo appears to unite two opposite fronts, deconstructing their previously stereotyped ideas, the tragic finale undermines the possibility of bridging the gap. "There is a fissure opening between them, the ground opening and the two of them on opposite banks." (Cartwright 2017, 75). Grace decides not to reveal that she is pregnant with Cairo's baby, and he self-immolates to protest the disenfranchisement of his community: "They voted to relight the fires. He will be the furnace and the flames." (Cartwright 2017, 82). The inability of Grace to communicate her pregnancy outlines the failure of the elite to reach out to the poorer strata of the population. As Cairo comments in his interview:

'A lot of it is gone, erased. The industrial past. And a lot of it is hidden away. The point is the people here built the country as it was to become. Now you act – we act – like there's some sort of shame to it all. The rest of the country is ashamed of us. You want us gone in one way or the other. It'll end in camps, it'll end in walls, you watch, and it won't be my people who build them, Grace, it'll be yours. It's already happening, in your well-meaning ways.' (Cartwright 2017, 72)

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[104] Cairo speaks the regional demotic of the Black County, which contrasts with Grace's received pronunciation. The different language exacerbates the distance between the two characters. The use of linguistic difference as a tool to further a process of Otherisation of the poor is a theme explored in the following section of the thesis.

The protagonist criticises the way the political elites dismiss England's industrial past, revealing a spreading sense of shame for the people suffering from the country's deindustrialisation. For Cairo, it is people like Grace who are responsible for building the walls that divide the nation, ignoring the needs of the poor. This leads to an ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor, perpetuating systematic inequality and social injustice. The elites' selfishness is reflected in Grace's decision to end her relationship with Cairo, preventing him from knowing about her pregnancy and effectively excluding him from any possibility of choice. Cairo's suicidal act symbolises his will to maintain a last vestige of personal agency, speaking up for the disenfranchisement of entire regions.

Geographical divisions play a significant role in shaping distinct forms of identification. In *The Cut,* we can see how the differences between London and the rest of England, particularly the impoverished north, became relevant in light of the Brexit referendum. Cartwright's engagement with the Brexit vote expresses the need to address geographic inequalities and the democratic deficit within Britain (Shaw 2021, 188). The vote distributions highlighted disparities between the percentages of Leave voters in different parts of the United Kingdom. England was the nation that had more votes to leave the EU than the other nations (the implications of this are analysed in the last chapter). In England, the big cities, particularly London, were the main supporters of the European membership, while the Midlands was the area where more people voted to Leave.[105] The uneven vote distribution also entailed an opposition between different ways of life and understanding of the world. The distinction between urban areas, considered cultural and political centres, and rural areas, often impoverished and neglected, is paramount to understanding the different attitudes towards contemporary political issues and, ultimately, towards Brexit.

The contrast between "the country and the city" is a topos that has been at work in cultural discourse and literature since classical times. Raymond Williams' fundamental work, *The Country and the City* (1973), assesses the constant presence of this dichotomy in English literature. As Williams argues, the country has been described as a place of innocence and virtue, where traditions are still alive, but also

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[105] To have a clearer idea of the vote distribution: "EU referendum: the result in maps and charts", BBC, 8 June 2021, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-36616028.

as a place of immobility and ignorance. On the contrary, the city has been associated with vice and immorality, business-oriented relationships, progress, and opportunities. These crystallised representations of the country and the city have been structural to English literary tradition, expressing a response to moments of significant social changes (Williams 1973, 297).[106] Moreover, the significance of idyllic rural imagery in English literature is deeply rooted in the country's cultural identity. The romanticised portrayal of countryside life is closely associated with the national discourse, as it represents a nostalgic vision of England's rural past and a longing for a simpler way of life. The next chapter investigates the connection between the idealised representation of the countryside, nostalgia, and Englishness. The ambivalent representation of the country and the city becomes essential to understanding another dimension of the contemporary national division. Williams substitutes the "two nations" of rich and poor to map England's divide along regional and cultural axes (Heidemann 2020, 680). The contrasting characteristics of the country and the city have become once again palpable during the Brexit referendum and have been captured in Brexit novels as well. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate the conflicting images of the country and the city in contemporary novels and explore "their interrelations and through these the real shape of the underlying crisis" (Williams 1973, 297).

In Brexit novels, the representation of the difference between the country and the city indicates larger structural divisions (Heidemann 2020, 678). Amanda Craig's *The Lie of the Land* engages with the theme of the divided nation through the representation of the geographical inequalities noticeable in England. Quentin and Lottie, the two protagonists of the story, embody opposite approaches to the encounter with the provincial Other. When the two separate and decide to move from London to Devon to save some money, they experience the profoundly different lifestyles of the two places. Despite growing up in Devon, Quentin deprecates the countryside and maintains a close attachment to London, "where everything happens" (Craig 2017, 13). He shows the stereotypical sense of superiority of Londoners towards the rest of

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[106] "Most obviously since the Industrial Revolution, but in my view also since the beginning of the capitalist agrarian mode of production, our powerful images of country and city have been ways of responding to a whole social development. This is why, in the end, we must not limit ourselves to their contrast but go on to see their interrelations and through these the real shape of the underlying crisis." (Williams 1973, 297).

England, making fun of the backward countryside in his journal columns. He is frustrated by the lack of cultural activity and life in the small village:

> What is wrong with country people? Why can't they move faster, and get on? As a child here, it seemed normal to have adults sleepwalking through life; as a teenager he had been shielded from rustic torpor by the wild eccentricities of school; and as an adult he had escaped. But on his way to see his parents before catching the train back to London, he is almost bursting out of his skin with impatience.
> There's a fashion for calling children Devon, as there used to be for calling them India or Africa, he's written in his column. No wonder. Devon is a foreign country. The only thing you can be absolutely certain of, as in India and Africa, is that you'll live in a state of permanent frustration. (Craig 2017, 34)

Devon's slow ways of life are so far from London and its fast-paced, vibrant rhythm that it is almost an entirely different country. Quentin and Lottie's children comment in another moment: "'When are we going back to England?' Stella demands. 'London isn't England,' Lottie says. 'This is England, too.' They don't believe her. How can it be true, when there are no streets, shops and lights?" (Craig 2017, 52). The phrase "London isn't England" recalls a typical refrain on the diversity of the capital city from the rest of the country. This difference also came forward during the Brexit referendum. London is considered the centre of culture, economy, and politics. It is a multicultural city that attracts millions of people from all over the world.

The deep distance between London and the rest of England, particularly the most disenfranchised and poor areas, entails not only an economic difference but also a cultural one. "'Mum, Devon's full of white people. They'll probably turn their dogs on me.'" (Craig 2017, 29), comments Xan, Lottie's mixed-race older child. The novel underlines the country people's backward and sometimes ignorant attitude, especially in their behaviour towards immigrants.[107] At the same time, Craig depicts the hardship of country life, showing how the absence of political attention and investments contributes to the slow demise of these places. The small village is impoverished, and the only place to work is the local pie factory, which increasingly employs Polish

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[107] The theme of immigration and how this novel engages with it is analysed in the last section of this chapter.

migrant workers, aggravating social conflict. The local school risks being closed because it does not have enough pupils, and most of the farmers are selling their properties to be converted to fancy vacation houses for the rich people from the city. This image of the countryside contrasts with the idyllic one advertised by the tourism industry and by nostalgic rhetoric of the green and rural England: "People like the idea of Devon, see, they think it means the goodness of nature, not people scraping a living." (Craig 2017, 109). As Williams argues, the imagery of the countryside as a "place of recreation, in which food is produced in Elysian fields of buttercups from happy hens and immortal herds." (Craig 2017, 258) is only "a myth functioning as a memory" (Williams 1973, 43) erasing the suffering of peasant workers, the old and sick, or the abandoned women. In contrast, *The Lie of the Land* represents the countryside as a place in decline, both economically and culturally. Yet Amanda Craig manages to highlight the good aspects of living in the countryside, too. Lottie comes to appreciate her new life in Devon so much that she decides to move there indefinitely. The natural environment reflects her feelings:

> This landscape with its mud and cold and winds and great, creaking trees fills her with a different kind of passion, inhuman yet bracing. A line keeps repeating itself in her head: Nature never did betray the heart that loved her. She doesn't know who said it, but it feels true. When she had first come here, feeling like a pioneer woman alighting in the uncharted wild with her caravans drawn up in a circle, it had been very different. Both the landscape and the house had been the incarnation of her desperation. Now, familiarity is breeding content. She likes the casement windows set in the deep, thick walls, and the window seats that look down the valley. She has ceased to mourn her large modern kitchen with its granite worktops and shiny steel fittings. The Rayburn with its puttering murmurs is a warm, genial presence, and even the old brown furniture, with its speckled mirrors and sprinklings of woodworm, is more friendly than the smart veneered things from Heals which she had prized in London. Bit by bit, this dank, drab place is becoming a home. In the evening when the wood-burner is lit, with the new cushions, curtains and lampshades, it actually looks cosy. (Craig 2017, 203-204)

Upon her arrival in the village, she only feels the harshness of the winter and the bareness of the landscape, mirroring her pain. The house and the natural environment

are initially the "incarnation of her desperation", but after some time, the old cottage transforms into a familiar place, and the outdated furniture appears "friendly" and "cosy" compared to the fancy one she had in London. The cottage is the starting place for rebuilding her life. Devon's nature, unlike her husband, never "betrayed" her, and becomes a cure for her broken heart. Furthermore, the village welcomes Lottie and her family, working as a balm for their broken relationship. The village offers Lottie a sense of community, which was missing from her life in London. Even if not the idyllic heaven on earth depicted by certain nostalgic rhetoric, it is a place where real people live and build relationships and meaningful experiences.

The growth process that changes Lottie's perspective about the countryside also happens to the protagonist of Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*. When Margaret is forced to move from the rural and quiet Helstone, in the south of England, to the industrial and smoky Milton, in the north, she goes through a cultural shock. Compared with the protagonists of *The Lie of the Land*, her position is reversed, but the descriptions of the differences between the country and the city are similar. Helstone is "like a village in a poem – in one of Tennyson's poems." (Gaskell 1854, 7), and Margaret is proud of living in such a beautiful place, where the pastoral environment fills her with joy. At the beginning of the novel, Margaret is in London at her aunt's and dreams of returning to the green forest of Helstone. All the small unpleasant details in her memories have been erased to leave an ideal image of her childhood home. When Margaret and her family move to the bleak Milton, a big manufacturing city, she immediately notices all the differences between the village of Helstone and the city:

> For several miles before they reached Milton, they saw a *deep lead-coloured cloud* hanging over the horizon in the direction in which it lay. It was all the *darker* from contrast with the pale *grey-blue* of the wintry sky; for in Heston there had been the earliest signs of frost. Nearer to the town, the air had a *faint taste and smell of smoke*; perhaps, after all, more a loss of *the fragrance of grass and herbage* than any positive taste or smell. Quick they were whirled over long, straight, *hopeless streets* of regularly-built houses, all small and of brick. Here and there a great oblong many-windowed factory stood up, *like a hen among her chickens*, puffing out black 'unparliamentary' smoke, and sufficiently accounting

for the cloud which Margaret had taken to foretell rain. (Gaskell 1854, 53, italics mine)

As highlighted in this quote, the dark, smelly Milton streets are compared to the green and fragrant Helstone. The roads are "hopeless" in comparison to the previously mentioned forest. The factory is assimilated to a countryside element, the hen, but it is puffing out black smoke, a dominant component in the descriptions of the industrial city. Milton is, as well, compared to London:

As they drove through the larger and wider streets, from the station to the hotel, they had to stop constantly; great loaded lorries blocked up the not over-wide thoroughfares. Margaret had now and then been into the city in her drives with her aunt. But there the heavy lumbering vehicles seemed various in their purposes and intent; here every van, every waggon and truck, bore cotton, either in the raw shape in bags, or the woven shape in bales of calico. People thronged the footpaths, most of them well-dressed as regarded the material, but with a slovenly looseness which struck Margaret as different from the shabby, threadbare smartness of a similar class in London. (Gaskell 1854, 53)

They are both big and chaotic cities but have different atmospheres in Margaret's eyes. The centrality of the cotton trade in Milton is immediately visible – "every waggon and truck bore cotton" – and the prejudices that both Margaret and her relatives have towards tradespeople augment her sense of cultural superiority and distance. Throughout the novel, London represents a place of richness and luxury, while Milton's architecture and style are described as severe and outmoded. Overall, her first impression of the city is bleak. Moreover, her encounter with one of the manufacturers, the hard-hearted Thornton, confirms her prejudices about northern people. Thornton is the emblem of the manufacturer from the north: he is a serious, proud, self-made man primarily concerned with his business. He criticises the slow-paced ways of living of the aristocracy in the rural south, opposing the industriousness and progress typical of the northern cities. Margaret feels an immediate antipathy for Thornton due to their completely opposing beliefs. As a result, she judges the people and the town of Milton based on her preconceptions, extending Thornton's austere ideas to the entire community.

However, when Margaret starts having human relationships with the local working people, she begins to appreciate the new place: "From that day, Milton became a brighter place to her. It was not the long, bleak sunny days of spring, nor yet was it that time was reconciling her to the town of her habitation. It was that in it she had found a human interest." (Gaskell 1854, 67). Her encounter with the plight of the working class brings her a new awareness of the condition of the poor. Only through her acknowledgement of the harshness of working-class life in Milton can Margaret grow out of her illusions about the south of England. Consequently, she admits that life, for poor people, is harsh everywhere: "'I only mean, Bessy, there's good and bad in everything in this world; and as you felt the bad up here, I thought it was but fair you should know the bad down there.'" (Gaskell 1854, 128). When, after losing both her parents, Margaret revisits Helstone with new, more mature eyes, she cannot recognise the idealised places in her memory.

> And, somehow, this visit to Helstone had not been all – had not been exactly what she had expected. There was change everywhere; slight, yet pervading all. Households were changed by absence, or death, or marriage, or the natural mutations brought by days and months and years, which carry us on imperceptibly from childhood to youth, and thence through manhood to age, whence we drop like fruit, fully ripe, into the quiet mother earth. Places were changed – a tree gone here, a bough there, bringing in a long ray of light where no light was before – a road was trimmed and narrowed, and the green straggling pathway by its side enclosed and cultivated. A great improvement it was called; but Margaret sighed over the old picturesqueness, the old gloom, and the grassy wayside of former days. (Gaskell 1854, 391)

Helstone is pervaded by "change", not only natural but also man-made. The crystallised and picturesque image of the village that Margaret had in her mind clashes with the reality of the present, where progress and improvements have modified the environment. The literary landscapes in *The Lie of the Land* and *North and South* become the elected site of social critique, showing not only urban desolation but also the plight of the rural population (Heidemann 2020, 680). Margaret understands she romanticised Helstone, not seeing the reality of it, in the same way, she judged Milton and the northern people, ready to dismiss them as insensible. This awareness and the

consequent maturation correspond to Margaret's change of heart towards Thornton. Their romance symbolises (in a typical Condition of England novel expedient) the union between the two sides of the nation and the possibility of finding common ground through personal relationships.[108]

The representation of national divisions is a key theme in Condition of England and Brexit novels. These novels explore the national divide through cultural, regional, and economic differences. The sense of national crisis stems from this deep-seated fracture within the national community. Furthermore, the novelists criticise the contemporary atomised society caused by the inability of the different groups to comprehend each other. The presence of opposed characterisations pervades Brexit novels, which aim to represent the gap in communication and the lack of empathy that afflicts the nation. The characters in the novels stand for different modes of identification, a device also deployed in the Condition of England novel. These novels represent the country's divisions during the early Victorian period. The ignorance of the upper classes about the awful condition of the poor provokes the uprising of the working class and causes social unrest. In both subgenres, the solutions to this problem are to be found in personal relationships and sympathy. Similarly to the romance between Sybil and Egremont in *Sybil, or The Two Nations*, which makes them realise the complexity of society and the impossibility of categorising individuals into stark divisions, the relationship between Grace and Cairo in *The Cut* manages to eradicate their stereotyped ideas about the other. In the same way, the friendship and honest talking between Thornton and Higgins allows them to ameliorate the workers' situation and reduce the violence of the strikes. Margaret's first-hand experience of the industrial north and her local friendships make her appreciate the place and find commonalities with people who initially seemed strangers to her, the same thing that Lottie experienced when moving to Devon. Individual experience is, in both subgenres, deemed central to erasing preconceived ideas about the other. Creating meaningful relationships that promote a sense of belonging is seen as the solution to bridging the national divide. In both subgenres, the answer to contemporary social problems is not offered thanks to social unrest or a radical change in the social and

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[108] As Borislav Knežević argues, Gaskell "did not simply want to construct the marriage as the symbol for the necessity of social dialogue; rather, she has the two characters take on characteristics they did not have prior to their encounter, in order to signify the actual possibilities of social accommodation and compromise." (Knežević, 2011, 100).

political system but through a renovated sense of community and interpersonal solidarity. As Lux comments in *Winter*, by Ali Smith:

> It's like the people in the play are living in the same world but separately from each other, like their worlds have somehow become disjointed or broken off each other's worlds. But if they could just step out of themselves, or just hear and see what's happening right next to their ears and eyes, they'd see it's the same play they're all in, the same world, that they're all part of the same story. (Smith 2017, 201)

Knowledge about the other side of the nation is considered essential to create an empathetic identification. Literature has the potential to fulfil this purpose, bringing awareness about the different faces of the nation and fostering sympathy. By comparing Condition of England novels and Brexit novels, this thesis aims to explore how literature, specifically novels, can engage in conversations with society and promote social change.

This concept is also essential in analysing the representation of the poor in Condition of England and Brexit novels. The two subgenres employ a realistic style to portray an accurate and truthful image of the poor. The Condition of England novels aim to examine the living and working conditions of the working class during the Victorian era in England. These novels typically focus on the struggles and hardships faced by the working class and provide a critical commentary on the social and economic issues of the time. Brexit novels, such as Anthony Cartwright's *The Cut* and Niall Griffiths' *Broken Ghost*, incorporate working-class characters to explore the newly emerged category of the left behind. These novels interpret the experiences of socially and economically marginalised people, highlighting the tensions aggravated by the Brexit referendum between the working-class communities and the political establishment. Both subgenres seek to investigate the poor's perspective and challenge preconceived ideas. In the next section, the thesis considers the ways in which the two subgenres represent the poor to delineate the similarities in the approach adopted.

3.3 Discovering and Deconstructing the Left Behind

The Brexit referendum brought to the centre of the political discussion the often-forgotten grievances of the poorest strata of the population. The media and the political

discourse recovered the label left behind to describe a group of citizens experiencing poverty, disenfranchisement, and instability. This term came again to prominence in the weeks following the Brexit referendum, but it had already been employed in the years before. Robert Ford and Matthew Goodwin, in their 2014 book, define the "ageing, shrinking, and left behind white working class" (Ford and Goodwin 2014, 132) as a social group seeing globalisation and multiculturalism as a threat (Ford and Goodwin 2014, 126). They are usually localised in "left behind areas", namely the northern industrial cities as opposed to the prosperous southeast of England. These people's invisibility in the political discourse augments their economic disenfranchisement. They have been "left behind" not only by the economic changes of the globalised world but also by party politics and, particularly, by the Labour Party that once represented them. Therefore, the term left behind is associated with monocultural post-industrial towns inhabited by an impoverished "traditional" white working class (Morrison 2021, 231). As James Morrison argues in his monograph *The Left Behind: Reimagining Britain's Socially Excluded* (2022), the industrial working class is at a loss because of deindustrialisation and the consequent establishment of a neoliberal gig economy (Morrison 2022, 48). The left behind is often culturally dismissed by part of the media and the liberal elite because it is considered backwards, nationalist, and racist. The marginalisation of working-class voters pushed them to redirect their allegiances to populist parties, like UKIP, which seemed to express their interests, a consequence visible during the Brexit referendum campaign. The media described the Leave victory as a backlash vote of the left-behind working class, a protest against the cultural and political elite who have ignored them for so long (see Seidler, 2018). In the weeks after the referendum, all the attention of media and political commentators was directed at this newly rediscovered social group, deemed responsible for the victory of the Leave side (Morrison 2022, 18). The portrayal of the left behind in newspapers and television was often hostile and stigmatising. The image was that of ignorant, lazy, and undeserving poor.[109] The "left behind question", a

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[109] The left behind was unjustly accused of being the cause of Brexit. In fact, several analyses of the vote showed that the idea of Brexit as a working-class revolt was only partially true. Even if many disadvantaged areas voted to Leave, most Leaver voters were middle-class people from the south of England, which shared with the left behind a sense of precarity in the context of the neoliberal economy. For reference and data, see, for instance, Danny Dorling and Sally Tomlinson, *Rule Britannia: Brexit and the End of Empire*, 2019, Chapter 1.

contemporary version of the Victorian "condition of England question", resonated strongly after the Brexit vote.

In his account of populism, Brian Elliott interestingly associates contemporary working conditions to those of the working class in early Victorian times, in the period following the Industrial Revolution (see Elliott 2021). He parallels the rise of contemporary populism to the creation of class consciousness and working-class movements in the nineteenth century.[110] Elliott traces some similarities between the two historical moments concerning the condition of the working class and the subsequent response to social injustice and oppression. In fact, during the years following the Napoleonic Wars, there was a boost in the general economic wealth, also thanks to technological advancements. Even so, there was no actual increase in the quality of life of the workers, which did not benefit from the general economic development. The author compares that period to the one after the 2008 financial crash, when the wealthy became wealthier while the majority of the working class experienced a deterioration in living standards (Elliott 2021, 36). In the words of economists and politicians, the enlarging distance between the rich and the poor finds its cure in the same doctrine of economic progress advocated two hundred years ago. Nowadays, the condition of the working class remains largely ignored by the upper classes, as much as it was unknown to the theorists of political economy in the early nineteenth century. The only difference between the two historical moments is that the working class was developing its class consciousness in the early Victorian period, favouring the emergence of political movements like Chartism. At present, working-class consciousness sounds like an anachronism, and organised political action is only a memory (Elliott 2021, 41-42). The two periods are also linked by what Elliott calls a "constant working-class experience of economic dependence and devaluation" (Elliott 2021, 45). The feeling of being deprived of material independence through a constant condition of precarity is present both in the early Victorian and contemporary times. In 1838, this caused the emergence of the Chartist movement, which was one of the first organised and nationwide labour movements. Nowadays, we are witnessing (not only in Great Britain but in the entire neoliberal Western world) a shift towards

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[110] Elliott's primary reference to document the rise of working-class consciousness and movements in Victorian times is E.P. Thompson's work *The Making of the English Working Class*, 1968.

populism and the rise of populist parties that claim to speak for the people.[111] A common trait between Chartism and populism is the nostalgia permeating their actions. Chartism advocated a return to pre-enclosure times when proletariats could access and work the land independently.[112] The myth of a free working class working in dignity and independence is central to the Chartist movement (Elliott 2021, 50). In the same way, nowadays, populists look back to a supposed better past of autonomy and independence, the one touted by the "Take Back Control" slogan, which was so effective in attracting working-class voters.

This parallel between the working class now and then is helpful in highlighting the similarity between Condition of England novels and Brexit novels in the representation of working-class characters. During the early Victorian age, when the Chartist movement was at its maximum expansion, there was a fervent literary interest in representing the working class. Writers wanted to depict the emergence of the new urban working class and shed light on their working and living conditions. At the same time, through literature, they were questioning the relationships between classes and trying to offer a resolution to the national divide. One of the novelties introduced in Condition of England novels is the mixture of realism and melodrama in narrating contemporary social issues. This applies, as well, to the description of the state of the poor. Condition of England novels realistically account for the unhealthy and miserable situation in which most people lived, adding to the bare fact-reporting (often drawn on sociological reports) emotional strength and melodramatic feelings to push the reader to sympathise with the poor. In Condition of England novels, the description of working-class characters in a positive light serves two purposes. Firstly, it aims to increase awareness about the plight of the poor. Secondly, it encourages compassion and eliminates the misconception that the poor are undeserving. These novels humanise the working-class characters, portraying them as individuals who deserve sympathy. Giving a voice to working-class characters (even if mediated through a middle-class perspective), Condition of England novelists investigate the reasons behind the emergence of Chartism to explain people's reaction to social injustice.

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[111] In recent years, several populist parties won consensus in Europe. Some examples are Rassemblement National in France (formerly Front National guided by Marine Le Pen), Movimento 5 Stelle and Lega Nord in Italy, and Law and Justice (PiS) in Poland.
[112] Chartists implemented a "Chartist Land Plan" between 1845 and 1851 to buy and sell lands to the working class. The plan was highly popular (around 70,000 Chartists invested in it), but it was later declared illegal (Elliott 2021, 51).

Novelists always condemn the violence of the Chartist movement. Even so, they promote dialogue between the parties by discussing the motives behind the choice to protest.

Brexit novels also aim for a less biased representation of working-class characters. They recover the common rhetoric that negatively depicts the left behind in the media, only to deconstruct it. As Condition of England novels, Brexit novels investigate the reasons for the resurgence of anti-establishment feelings and give voice to the resentment of a neglected part of the country. They include realistic descriptions of the contemporary social situation, often incorporating media and political discourses, to confront the theme of the disenfranchisement of the working class. At the same time, Brexit novels seek to give individuality to the depersonalised picture of the left behind, portraying individual struggles and representing the feelings and thoughts of working-class characters, contrasting with the negative image circulating in public discourse. This mode of representation enables an empathetic identification with the left behind that pushes for "convivial" forms of belonging.[113] Through narrative, the authors show a different perspective, often silenced during the referendum campaign, and explore the reasons behind people's anger and frustration. The presence of working-class or left-behind characters in Brexit novels recovers the same interest at the core of Condition of England novels to engage with the disenfranchisement and invisibility of the poor.

The representation of the working class in literature became relevant thanks to Victorian Condition of England novels. All the novels of the subgenres include some working-class characters and the representation of working-class neighbourhoods. These are depicted with a mix of crude realism and compassion, trying to move the readers to empathise with the poor's plight. In Gaskell's novels, for instance, the working conditions in the mills are described with detailed precision. Moreover, the working-class characters are infused with humanity and feelings, drawing directly from the author's first-hand experience. In Gaskell's *North and South*, Nicholas Higgins and his family are not stereotyped. She acknowledges their flaws but also their rights to be treated as humans and work under fair conditions.

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[113] The concept of conviviality refers to Paul Gilroy's definition of the term in *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture* (2004), which is fundamental in discussing multiculturalism in contemporary Britain. In this context, the concept of conviviality is extended to denote an idea of community based on fluidity, openness, and respectful cohabitation.

But Nicholas was neither an habitual drunkard nor a thorough infidel. He drank to drown care, as he would have himself expressed it: and he was infidel so far as he had never yet found any form of faith to which he could attach himself, heart and soul. Margaret was a little surprised, and very much pleased, when she found her father and Higgins in *earnest conversation* – each speaking with *gentle politeness* to the other, however their opinions might clash. Nicholas – clean, tidied (if only at the pump-trough), and *quiet spoken*—was a new creature to her, who had only seen him in the rough independence of his own hearthstone. He had 'slicked' his hair down with the fresh water; he had adjusted his neck-handkerchief, and borrowed an odd candle-end to polish his clogs with and there he sat, enforcing some opinion on her father, with a *strong Darkshire accent*, it is true, but with a lowered voice, and a good, *earnest* composure on his face. (Gaskell 1854, 221-222, italics mine)

Gaskell describes Nicholas as a good man, rough but well-meaning. He is intelligent and likes to play with words: "He was in a mood to take a surly pleasure in giving answers that were like riddles." (Gaskell 1854, 286). His good heart and earnestness allow him to create a dialogue with his master, Thornton. Nicholas is a well-rounded character who undergoes positive changes and improvements throughout the story. Gaskell tries to go to the roots of his grievances. He is a Union member and joins the labourer's strike, a choice seen negatively by Margaret and probably by Gaskell herself. However, his loyalty to the Union is explained and justified as a necessity to group against the injustices perpetrated by the masters (Gaskell 1854, 228). His actions are seen through the lens of empathy and compassion. He works hard to support his daughters and helps his neighbour Boucher and his family when needed. This multi-layered and compassionate representation of a working-class character is typical of Condition of England novels and shows a new sensibility towards the social condition of the poor.

Even so, Condition of England novels portray the poor from a middle-class, often patronising, perspective.[114] The authors underline the need to overcome a

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[114] As mentioned in the first chapter, I selected Condition of England novels written by middle-class authors exclusively. Even so, it is worth pointing out that there is a corpus of Condition of England novels written by working-class writers and members of the Chartist movement. See, for reference, Ian Haywood, *The Literature of Struggle: An Anthology of Chartist Fiction*, 2016, and Martha Vicinus,

comprehension gap between the classes. Higgins' description as a man who talks in riddles and whose understanding is complicated by the strong Yorkshire accent is a trope which returns in several scenes. Higgins' language adheres to the Yorkshire demotic of the time. The choice of using the local dialect outlines the differences between the characters' social status: even if Thornton is a Yorkshire man, he speaks received English. This linguistic diversity favours an "Otherisation" of the poor. As defined in postcolonial theory, the Other is identified by its difference from the centre and its position as the subject of power. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha argues that Othering discourses aim to portray the Other as "degenerate" to justify prevarication and oppression (Bhabha 1994, 70).[115] As a result, the Other – in this case, the poor Other – is marked by a negative connotation, suggesting their inferiority and the need for governance. The inability to comprehend Nicholas' language suggests his status as Other and, consequently, his supposed ignorance and immorality. Initially, Margaret's failure to comprehend Higgins' idiom corresponds to her lack of awareness about the condition of the working class in Milton. She cannot understand the poor or their suffering, and she looks at them through the filter of prejudice. Only after having built a personal relationship with Nicholas does Margaret start understanding him and the poor in general. She even learns the local demotic, so much so that her mum accuses her of using "vulgarities": "The 'vulgarity' Margaret spoke of referred purely to the use of local words" (Gaskell 1854, 233). This process of becoming acquainted with the poor Other, knowing their language but, most importantly, their conditions and feelings, is central to the novel's message. Compassion, friendship, and mutual understanding can potentially bridge the gap between different social classes and erase differences. The novel promotes the idea that connecting with people from various backgrounds can break down the barriers of class and culture.

The linguistic difference that prevents the identification with the poor is a narrative element also deployed in Cartwright's Brexit novel *The Cut*. Cairo, the working-class protagonist, uses the regional demotic of Dudley, which contrasts with Grace's received pronunciation. The communication gap between the two exacerbates

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"Chartist Fiction and the Development of a Class-Based Literature" in *The Socialist Novel in Britain: Towards the Recovery of a Tradition*, 1982.

[115] Bhabha refers to the colonised Other, but the concept can include other processes of marginalisation, exclusion, and domination, such as the ones concerning class and gender. The Otherisation of the female gender is a topic analysed in the next section of the thesis.

their contrast and outlines the distance between different parts of the country.[116] When Cairo's interview appears on television, they use subtitles for his speech, "like he wasn't speaking English at all" (Cartwright 2017, 29). The feeling of being unheard and "made invisible, mute" (Cartwright 2017, 18) by the central government is one reason for voting to Leave. The poor, who cannot speak "proper" English, are perceived as Other and, therefore, marginalised and excluded from the political discourse. Brexit novels recover the ongoing process of Otherisation of the poor, central to the Brexit rhetoric. After the referendum, the Remain-side, liberal intelligentsia described working-class voters with an "Orientalising bewilderment" (Morrison 2022, 18). The media "anthropologised" the British working class as a lesser-evolved breed from distant parts (Younge, 2016a). The so-called Remainers were shocked to apprehend the existence of a vast part of the population, the left behind, who were not benefiting from multiculturalism or globalisation and were living in a state of disenfranchisement and social regression. The subsequent interest of journals, academia, and the general public about the left behind recalls the same Victorian interest in discovering the working class at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

During the early Victorian times, statistical and sociological studies reporting the working-class conditions were very popular. The most famous one was Henry Mayhew's article, "A Visit to the Cholera Districts of Bermondsey", in which he described the horrifying sanitary conditions of the poor in London (Adams 2009, 124). Mayhew described himself as "a traveller in the undiscovered country of the poor […] of whom the public has less knowledge than of the most distant tribes of the earth" (Mayhew 1849). This exotic imagery linked to the poor resonated during all Victorian times (Adams 2009, 124). Poor people were often associated with savages for their ways of living, ignorance, and cultural distance from the upper classes. They were considered a different, uncivilised race and heavily stigmatised. This image also emerged in the literature of the time.[117] For instance, in *Bleak House*, Dickens

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[116] Simon Featherstone argues that "the North [of England] has been constructed as an English 'other'", often disregarded and marginalised from the "achieved identity of real England" linked to the south. At the same time, the same north "constructed itself as a distinctive expression of English modernity", offering an alternative form of identification characterised by innovation (Featherstone 2008, 85).

[117] "The repetition of the metaphors of the 'two nations', of the poor as a 'foreign country', of the slums as 'dark and unknown regions' – phraseology of which non-fictional writers were as guilty as novelists – served to cement, rather than surmount, this gap in readers' mind […]. Whilst compassion and action were certainly stimulated, such phraseology did nothing to diminish the effects of, and acceptance of, hierarchies of power within English governmental and industrial administration. Indeed, by locking into

compares the "poor at home" with the "poor abroad" and criticises those organisations that want to help only the far Other without considering the close ones. Similarly, in *Hard Times*, Dickens's only social novel, the working class is described superficially due to Dickens's ignorance about industrial life. He writes about it as a tourist, from an outsider's point of view (Cazamian 1973, 165). The working people are "generically called 'the Hands,' - a *race* who would have found more favour with some people, if Providence had seen fit to make them *only hands*, or, like the *lower creatures* of the seashore, only hands and stomachs" (Dickens 1854, 58, emphasis mine). There is no individuality for the poor in this description, they are a "race" and move and act all in the same way. Another example of the Otherisation of the poor in Condition of England novels is the description of the city of Wodgate in Disraeli's *Sybil or The Two Nations*. The language used to depict the city and its inhabitants matches the expectation of a scared explorer arriving in a land of savages: "It is not that the people are immoral, for immorality implies some forethought; or ignorant, for ignorance is relative; but they are *animals*; unconscious; their minds a blank; and their worst actions only the impulse of a gross or *savage instinct*." (Disraeli 1845, 187 emphasis mine). The people of Wodgate, a working-class society, are depicted as animals who act following their instinct, without culture or sentiments. The description of the city, its social structures, its traditions, and the ways of living of its inhabitants recalls the style of travel reports.[118]

The portrayals of poor people as savages, as a foreign nation, and as members of a different race were derived from statistical reports and political discourses, which influenced the general opinion. The dominant theories of the time – political economy, Darwinism, and Evangelicalism – placed the individual's ability to prevail over others at the centre. These ideas permeated the moralistic representation of the poor as lazy and undeserving because unable to succeed.[119] The undeserving poor,[120] idle, and

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a developing discourse of colonialism, one could argue that notions of class, almost of racial superiority, were implicitly played upon." (Flint 1987, 8).

[118] Sheila Smith points out that Disraeli's description of Wodgate is based on Horne's report for the "Children's Employment Commission", published in 1842. In the report, Horne describes the case of the city of Willenhall, where there was no authority or church. See Smith, Sheila M. "Willenhall and Wodgate: Disraeli's Use of Blue Book Evidence." in *The Review of English Studies*, 1962.

[119] The New Poor Law of 1834 was the result of this way of thinking, cutting welfare provisions and restricting the number of poor entitled to state relief (Kidd 1998, 4).

[120] In his 1989 work *The Undeserving Poor: America's Enduring Confrontation with Poverty*, Michael Katz investigates the concept of the undeserving poor and starts a discussion about the moralistic rhetoric surrounding the poor.

culturally backward is a concept rooted in Victorian social and political discourse, arriving almost unchanged today with the resulting stigmatisation of economically disadvantaged people and areas (Morrison 2022, 34).[121] Brexit has seen the working class return to the centre of the political agenda. After the referendum, the left behind assumed the unjust blame for being the leading cause of Brexit. Their representation in media and political discourse was predominantly negative and often suffered from the same Othering perspective embraced by Victorian social reports. Some Brexit novels adopted the same stigmatising rhetoric used by the media. Some authors are openly critical towards the backward way of thinking of a part of the population, overlooking the grievances and anger of the left behind. One example is Johnathan Coe's *Middle England*, where the main left-behind character, Colin, is described negatively as an old, angry white man incapable of letting go of a past that no longer exists. Other Brexit novels, instead, recover and challenge the representation of the working class as Other. Through realistic literary representation and empathetic engagement with left-behind characters, these novels deconstruct the preconceived ideas about the poor and gesture towards the possibility of a more inclusive social discourse.

The Brexit novel that focuses most prominently on the question of the left behind is Niall Griffiths' *Broken Ghost*, which considers the poorest strata of Welsh society. The socioeconomic disenfranchisement of Wales presented in the novel reinforces the argument that the Brexit vote signalled dissatisfaction with the state of the nation rather than an attack on EU integration. The Welsh support for the decision to leave the EU in 2016 was based on a long-standing resentment against Westminster, in a nation which had not yet recovered from the Thatcherite era and the 2008 economic crisis (Shaw 2021, 106). The three protagonists of the novel are disempowered and disenfranchised. They live off benefits and minor crimes. Their inability to fit in the highly productive and work-centred contemporary society makes them the perfect epitome of the left behind. Their position is that of outsiders, who are victims of the individualistic neo-liberal society and who crave a sense of community, of "contact". The ghostly vision they experience gives them temporary relief from the

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[121] In his analysis of the undeserving poor in Great Britain, Robbie Shilliam argues that the distinction between deserving and undeserving poor has been central in the discourse about social policies from the poor laws of the Victorian period to Thatcher's dismantlement of the welfare state to the New Labour's "workfare" (see Shilliam, 2018).

feeling of loss. The novel outlines the contrast between the atomised, violent society and the need, exacerbated by the ghostly vision, "for something transcendent" (Griffiths qtd in Shaw 2021, 206). The spontaneous birth of an open community at the site of the vision represents an alternative to the individualist society that rejects the three protagonists. Griffiths openly denounces the carelessness of the government to help those in trouble. As in *The Cut*, the opposition between "us" and "them", between those who scrape by for a living and those who are in power, is remarked throughout the novel:

> I will never be like them. I will never Do The Right Thing, as they fucking see it. There's a glow in me now. […] —But look at these cunts; them who've already got massive amounts of money but who help themselves to the money of others, the poor people, the people who don't have much and what they do have they've worked their friggin arses off to get. […] You and them, lad. It's still you and them. And it always fuckin will be. (Griffiths 2019, 64-65)

Adam, a recovered drug addict, is aware that society tends to discard the people in need, leaving behind those considered undeserving. When Adam visits the rehab facility where he previously resided, he learns that the government is cutting funding for rehabilitation centres, denying the residents any form of recovery and reintegration into society.

> Should I tell these people that what is waiting for them is a widespread attitude, government-led and media-fed, that sees the treatment they are undergoing as a waste of time and money? That they'd better sort themselves out so quickly and completely that it must be miraculous because there's no help for them out there cos all services for the damaged and the vulnerable have been cut almost to extinction, that there's no help anywhere for the young and the sick? […] I'll tell them that anyone who needs state support is now regarded as a scrounging parasite to be ostracised, and persecuted, to death if needs be. (Griffiths 2019, 74-75)

As Adam argues, political propaganda and the media contribute to spreading the notion of the poor as a burden to society. The people in need are considered "scrounging parasites" (the same rhetoric applied to migrants), and they are blamed for the current

economic problems. Griffiths harshly criticises the contemporary social situation and the Brexit campaign, which has exacerbated these individualistic tendencies. Even if the detailed account of the life of the three protagonists and their addictions is brutal, the author describes them with profound humanity and compassion. The cause of their problems is a disrupted social tissue which leaves them isolated and hurting:

> I am bored anywhere. Anywhere can bore the soul out of you, the same as anywhere can be exciting – it all depends on what you're carrying around inside. But if what you're carrying is fuckin Johnny and Carlos and the knowledge that you'll soon be thrown out of your house and, around it all, a giant big black fuckin hole, if that's the kind of stuff you're hauling around with you wherever you go then… (Griffiths 2019, 154)

Pain and fear bring them to resort to self-harming habits because the social net that should have rescued them is non-existent.

The solution to this atomised society is human contact and a renovated sense of community. The words "thirst", "glow", and "contact" ("cysllt" in Welsh) are refrained throughout the novel, highlighting the thematic core of the story. The community gathering where the three protagonists have witnessed the ghost exemplifies the possibility of reactivating forms of belonging based on solidarity and mutual help. The people who answered the "broken ghost" call are the outsiders, considered the waste of society, the "residuum". They are those left behind who have created an inclusive prototype of society. As Emma comments:

> There's so much stuff going on that me eyes don't know where to look, there's people gathered around the fires and in the water and standing around in groups or dancing and running. All ages – from babies held to their parents' chests to people so old they need sticks to move. […] This is – this is – up here is a glimpse into how life could, should, be. I sense no anger. There is no violence simmering underneath the surface. It's kind of – fuck, how can I say this – kind of like, up here, everybody is living how they're supposed to live. (Griffiths 2019, 310-311)

The three protagonists, who, after seeing the ghost, have relapsed into self-harming habits, find themselves on the campsite. There, they meet influential people in their lives, finding closure and hope for healing. Unfortunately, the government takes this

hope away, sending the police to dismantle the camping violently. This finale outlines the impossibility for the government and the media to understand the needs of the left behind. The commune is accused of being an illegal camp for immigrants and, therefore, a threat to public order. The idea of a community based on solidarity and not on productivity is frowned upon by the government, which comments in an interview with words that remind the extreme Benthamism of Coketown: "Not to mention the more, ah, intangible concerns of lost man-hours and economic inactivity. It's criminality, pure and simple. It's betrayal; the will of the British people is that we leave the EU, and it is every Briton's duty to ensure that we make a success of that. It is sabotage." (Griffiths 2019, 293). In the novel, the government seems only interested in the economic value of people, exploiting the stigmatisation of the left behind to promote Brexit.

The author openly criticises the post-Brexit society and the government, which appears more invested in saving its economic interests than in understanding the needs of its most disadvantaged citizens. The representation of the most disenfranchised strata of the population is central to offering an insight into a part of the society forgotten or disregarded, articulating a counter-narrative to the dominant discourse around the poor. After the referendum, the media and a part of the political elite depicted the left-behind voters as the enemy, blameworthy for the decision to leave the EU. This augmented the perception that the nation was divided into conflicting parts. Brexit novels such as *The Cut* and *Broken Ghost* responded to this sense of bewilderment through narration, engaging with and deconstructing the stigmatising representation of the left behind. As in Condition of England novels, which seek to move to compassion and raise awareness about the condition of the urban working class at the beginning of the nineteenth century, these Brexit novels offer a more complex and empathetic portrait of the contemporary working class, disenfranchised and exhausted, advocating for a more open and welcoming society.

In Condition of England and Brexit novels, the creation of a more hospitable and sympathetic national community is made possible through personal relationships and empathetic feelings. The authors of both subgenres investigate the possibility of healing the national division and uniting the "two nations". In the novels, female characters often possess the ability to unite different parts of the nations. The characterisation of women as mediators between the divide is a frequent and significant theme in both Condition of England novels and Brexit novels. The

following section focuses on the role of women in these novels, identifying the key traits of some leading female characters, such as Lux in *Winter*, Florence in *Spring*, Margaret in *North and South* and Caroline and Shirley in *Shirley*. The section explores why female characters are included in the narrative and how this can contribute to an alternative national discourse.

3.4 Women as Mediators Across the Divide

Condition of England novels and Brexit novels represent the conflict between classes as well as between different faces of the nation. England is figuratively divided in half, and the two sides appear irreconcilable. The solution offered to ease this fracture and face social changes is the creation of personal relationships and a supportive community. In many Condition of England novels, as well as in a number of Brexit novels, the effort of female characters promotes a dialogue across the divide. Female characters retain the ability to mediate because of their status as outsiders. Women are traditionally relegated to the margins of society, a fact that enables them to reach out to both sides of the national divide and offer an alternative point of view. The novels that better exemplify this idea are *Shirley* and *North and South*, when we consider Condition of England novels, and *Winter* and *Spring*, when we consider Brexit novels. The five protagonists of these novels are women, configured as strangers, coming from another country (Lux and Florence) or another city (Margaret and Shirley). Shirley, Catherine, Margaret, Lux, and Florence break away from the outdated and stereotypical feminine image. They possess exceptional intelligence, wit, and sensitivity. However, in patriarchal societies, these qualities are often suppressed as they are deemed strange or uncommon in women. These women, instead, are described as able to look at things from a different perspective and bring their opinions into the discussion between the two parts of the national divide. Even if marginalised and alien, these characters possess a strong voice and manage to influence the other personages and mediate between them.

The presence of female characters in Brexit novels counterbalances their under-representation in the Brexit campaign and their cancellation in the public discourse surrounding Brexit. In the Brexit referendum, gender had been a pivotal question, even if it has often been overlooked. Brexit has been a battle between men,

frequently resorting to a rhetorical ground of toxic masculinity.[122] Strong male figures (Boris Johnson, Michael Gove, Nigel Farage, David Cameron) who were all educated in the best public schools dominated the debate and showed what Seidler calls "white masculine entitlement" (Seidler 2018, 80). The reference to femininity was associated with weakness in the political discourse. Women were almost absent from the public debate and the campaign's content.[123] In Brexit novels, instead, women often become the key to showing the possibility of social change.

An example is their "spectral" presence (almost as spectral as their presence in the Brexit debate) in Ali Smith's novels. Ali Smith often employs the topos of the spectral Other, which arrives unexpectedly and whose characterisation appears ineffable. The spectral Other can show people a different and more genuine approach to human relationships. As noticed by Stephen Levin (in analysing another of Smith's novels), the arrival of the Other can put into discussion the self and create the conditions for thinking of new forms of belonging (see Germanà and Horton 2013, Chapter Three).[124] Both Lux in *Winter* and Florence in *Spring* are representative of this idea. They are both coming from different countries, so they are identified as Other for their nationality and their gender. They are mysterious, and their arrival in the story is as fortuitous as their disappearance: "Lux. How can anyone disappear so completely in such an age of everything tracked and known?" (Smith 2017, 319).[125] Florence also has the magical ability to enter and exit places without anyone noticing:

> She just walked around, like she was meant to be there. Nobody stopped her.
> When a door in front of her was shut she waited till it opened for some other
> reason and just walked through it. It was so plain and simple when they watched

[122] For reference, see Columba Achilleos-Sarll and Benjamin Martill, *Toxic Masculinity: Militarism, Deal-Making and the Performance of Brexit* (2019), in which the authors analyse the use of language associated with militarism and toxic masculinity in the Brexit discourse.

[123] Jane Green and Rosalind Shorrocks argue that "perceptions of gender discrimination, measuring the gender dimension of the 'backlash', is a form of resentment about change and nostalgia for the past, and as such should be associated with voting Leave, alongside other predictors". The Leave side, even if not explicitly, "portrayed a particularly 'masculine' image, with Nigel Farage adopting a 'blokeish' and 'working man's' persona and making a series of derogatory comments about working women in particular. Therefore, insofar as men perceiving discrimination and disadvantage by their gender were seeking representation in the UK's political debate, the foremost champion of leaving the European Union provided some of that representation." (Green and Shorrocks 2023, 355).

[124] Levin argues that "Smith depicts the arrival of the spectre as an occasion to meet the other with a stance of radical hospitality, as an 'event' that creates the conditions for new modes of attachment and love." (Germanà and Horton 2013, 54).

it that it just wasn't a mystery. A door opens. She goes through it. (Smith 2019, 141)

She manages to enter several IRCs (Immigration Removal Centres) and free the people unjustly detained without being stopped by the police. Florence can also convince people to take good actions, thanks to her ability to play with words and language. The power of language to create new worlds and open new perspectives is a central theme in Smith's literary work. Smith's characters focus on the literal and lateral meanings of the words, uncovering the frailty of political rhetoric and the lies hidden behind common expressions. Florence, for instance, is able, with her "inquisitive innocence" (Masterson 2020, 362), to expose the violence concealed in the official rhetoric of the IRC. She confronts the director of the IRC:

> The other thing I wanted to ask is. I read online yesterday that the High Court has said it's also illegal to detain, in detention centres like this one, people who have been tortured. And then I read that the Home Office redefined the word torture to give it a more 'narrow' definition. So I wanted to ask someone who might know. What is a narrow definition of torture and what is a broad definition of torture? (Smith 2019, 205)

Her direct questions leave the director speechless and unable to answer Florence's precise interrogations accurately. Her comment on torture's "narrow definition" unveils the danger and violence which can be concealed in language. Moreover, Florence likes to write creative stories, catching media and political discourses and parodying them. Her ability to create new words allows her to propose a different glimpse into society, pointing at the possibility of building, as well, new and more inclusive realities: "No, I mean revolve, the girl says. As in revolution. We'll roll forward to a new place. You mean revolt, Brit says. You're talking about revolting. I mean revolve, the girl says. No you don't, Brit says. I do. We'll turn it round, the girl says. We'll do it all differently." (Smith 2019, 198). In Smith, the presence of the spectral Other is signalled by linguistic disruption and narrative fragmentation (Germanà and Horton 2013, 48). Florence's arrival in the IRC puts into discussion not only language but also personal beliefs.

Florence's unusual perspective challenges the monolithic ideas of the people she encounters. She brings a new energy into the life of Brittany, a guard in an Immigration Removal Centre (the next section explores the theme of immigration). When Brittany decides to accompany Florence on her trip to Scotland, she suddenly feels alive and happy again after the numbness she was feeling at her job:

> I mean, look at Brittany Hall. She literally can't believe her own life. She is clever again. She is witty and entertaining. She is on the ball, too. She should be at work. It's a Monday. Instead, no hedges, no underworld, here she is, and a child – not just any child, but a real child who also happens to be the legendary child – is not just sitting next to her but has fallen so completely asleep against her right arm that Brit feels more protective about somebody she doesn't know, no relation, some stranger's child she only met this morning, than she knew she could feel about anyone or anything. (Smith 2019, 198-199)

The personal relationship Brittany establishes with Florence makes her feel human again and makes her believe in the possibility of a different approach to life. In a wordplay about the music group Florence and the Machine, Brittany identifies herself as the machine. Later, Florence comments that her final purpose is to humanise the machine, that is, to humanise Brittany herself: "Brittany, we are humanizing the machine, Florence says. Get with the humanizing the machine programme." (Smith 2019, 309-310). The possibility of becoming more human fades when Brittany decides to denounce Florence to the immigration authorities. After this act, Brittany returns to her old job and feels even less human. She seems to close her heart entirely to the possibility of hospitality and empathy. Even so, she keeps Florence's notebook, where the child has written stories and fantasies. Reading the notebook is the last act of resistance that Brittany does against her slowly fading into isolation. Once again, the power of language and words becomes the most suitable means to connect the opposite parts of the nation.

Lux has a similar role in *Winter*. She also reflects on the imaginative power of language, deconstructing common expressions and revealing their senseless rhetoric. Invited to share the Christmas lunch with the Cleves family, Lux starts wondering about the choice of putting baby Jesus in a manger: "Is it a manger they put the baby in because the baby's going to be eaten in the end?" (Smith 2017, 195). From this

reflection, she starts attacking the meaning of Christmas itself and its consumerist dimension, which gestures towards an empty hope:

> And anyway, I was also wondering, how is it okay, Lux is saying, okay in any way, to be wishing everybody peace, peace on earth, goodwill to all men, merry, happy, but just for today, or only for these few days a year? And if we can do it for a few days, why can't or won't we do it all the year? I mean. That story of the football match between enemies in the First World War in the trenches. It reveals it. The stupidity.
> It's gestural, Art says. It gestures to hope.
> But it's empty gestural, Lux says. Why would you not work all the time for peace on earth and goodwill? What's the point of Christmas, otherwise? (Smith 2017, 195)

Her honest look at common linguistic expressions also uncovers the dishonesty of the Brexit rhetoric: "It is strange, Lux says, to think of anyone in this country ever talking about a room of the future when people like so much to buy new things that look like old things, and the only room I'm used to hearing people talk about is the *no* room, the *no more* room." (Smith 2017, 205 italics in original). She emphasises the spreading of hostile messages, which convey the idea that there is no more space in the country for new incomers. Lux's ability to go beyond the sense of words exposes political speech to scrutiny, calling for a more truthful meaning. Art, a central character in *Winter*, who created an online poetic persona for himself, uses language to build masks and lies about his authentic self. The encounter with Lux opens him to the possibility of truth:

> I'm not talking about *you* not being real. I'm talking about *this* not being real, Lux says. The act of it is real to me, he says. It kind of keeps me sane. Lux nods. She looks at him with what afterwards, when he remembers this talk, he will think of as gentleness. She looks at the screen again. She doesn't say anything for a moment. Then she says: I get it. I do. I see. Okay. Now. Tell me something that really did happen, I mean a real thing, not a blog thing, and just a little thing, but something you do remember. I mean from when you were really the boy you imagine you are in that memory you made up about the twigs and the puddle. A real thing? he says. Any real thing, she says. (Smith 2017, 188 italics in original)

Lux urges Art to write something honest and real. After their encounter, he decides to stop ignoring the world around him and hiding his opinions. Instead, he uses his blog to discuss about politics. The adherence of language to reality, which seems elusive in the contemporary post-truth era of social networks and political doublespeak, becomes central to building genuine and inclusive relationships. Lux deconstructs the hypocrisy of conventional linguistic practices with her curiosity and pushes for more authentic ways of relating to others.

Thanks to her candour, Lux also puts into discussion Sophia's beliefs. When introduced to Lux for the first time, Sophia is very hostile: "I also wonder if you know how unwelcome you are here, his mother says." (Smith 2017, 85). [126] After some time, Lux manages to breach her defences, and Sophia opens to her and tells her history: "It is sometimes easier to talk to a stranger, Sophia said." (Smith 2017, 253). Similarly, Lux makes Art realise his flaws and reach a more honest version of himself. After meeting Lux, he decides to try to maintain a relationship with his mother, who was estranged from him: "Just talk with her, she says. Talk to her. Nothing in common, he says. Everything in common, Lux says. She's your history." (Smith 2017, 311-312). Lux repairs their broken bond and, with her presence, points towards the possibility of a more empathetic form of community, epitomised by the Cleves family. Lux's ability to promote affectionate relationships underpins the need for sincerity and compassion. The Cleves family becomes a model for the nation to heal its fractures.

The linguistic intelligence that characterises Florence and Lux is detectable in three other female characters, which pertain to a completely different age: Margaret from *North and South* and Shirley and Caroline from *Shirley*. Margaret learns how to communicate with her new friends from the north. In the beginning, she faces some problems with communication: "'What do you mean?' asked Margaret. 'We must understand the words differently.'" (Gaskell 1854, 158). Like Lux and Florence, she is considered a foreigner. Even if she comes from England, her habits and language distinguish her from the people in Milton. After a while, she starts using the "factory slang" (Gaskell 1854, 232), finding it helpful to communicate in her new environment: "'Now, Mr Thornton, though "knobstick" has not a very pretty sound, is it not expressive? Could I do without it, in speaking of the thing it represents? If using local

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[126] Both Brittany and Sophia are a representation of Brexit Britain, and they show the most hostile face of the country.

words is vulgar, I was very vulgar in the Forest, —was I not, mamma?'" (Gaskell 1854, 233). She gets accomplished speaking and understanding the local idiom and can mediate between Higgins and Thornton. Margaret becomes a social mediator, alternatively dialoguing with Higgins and Thornton and presenting their opponents' visions to each other. She can, therefore, speak both the "language" of the master and the man, interpreting and translating their ideas (Elliott Williams 1994, 41). Margaret's mediating skills operate through language and sympathy, unlike the men's stubborn lack of communication. She manages to find common ground and push for understanding feelings between the two classes.

The two female protagonists in *Shirley* have similar abilities to communicate with men and mediate between them. Shirley and Caroline are the representatives of two different kinds of women. Shirley is a landlady, and she owns an estate. Her social position and wealth bring male privileges and give her the freedom to speak her mind without many restrictions. She is bold and not afraid to talk to the men around her as a peer: "I am an esquire! Shirley Keeldar, Esquire, ought to be my title. They gave me a man's name; I hold a man's position. […], really I feel quite gentlemanlike." (Brontë 1849, 79). Interestingly, Shirley refers to herself as Esquire, a man's title, as if the only way to be heard in society is to take on the role of a man. Caroline, on the other side, is quiet and modest. She is the quintessence of the Victorian woman. Her quietness and the silence to which she is constantly reduced speak of the oppression of women within the Victorian patriarchal society (Taylor 1979, 91). At the same time, Brontë gives Caroline the central speech about women's condition:

> Fathers! Consider the matter well; do not dismiss it with an idle jest or an unmanly insult. You would wish to be proud of your daughters, and not to blush for them; then seek for them an interest and an occupation which shall raise them above the flirt, the mischief-making tale-bearer. Keep your girls' minds narrow and fettered, and they will be a plague and a care to you. Cultivate them – give them scope and work; they will be your gayest companions in health, your tenderest nurses in sickness, your most faithful prop in age. (Brontë 1849, 159)

She advocates for women to access occupations outside the house to avoid the tedious life that men force women to lead. Caroline also manages to change Moore's mind about the unfair treatment of his workers. In fact, when proposing to her, Moore

promises to listen to her suggestions about how to treat his men fairly: "I will do good; you shall tell me how: indeed, I have some schemes of my own, which you and I will talk about on our own hearth one day." (Brontë 1849, 260). Caroline becomes a social mediator between the needs of the men and the will of the master.

Moreover, Shirley and Caroline function as metaphorical representatives of the working class. As Helen Taylor maintains, women and the working class in *Shirley* are represented as equally oppressed and economically dependent by male masters (Taylor 1979, 86-87). Taylor takes as an example the criticism moved to the novel by Terry Eagleton. Eagleton argues that Brontë is not interested in the plight of the working classes. In fact, in the main scene, in which the workers take action and attack Moore's mill, they are entirely "invisible" and therefore deprived of agency. For Taylor, Eagleton fails to see that, in the same scene, Shirley and Caroline are as invisible as the working class (Taylor 1979, 86). Brontë considers "the plight of oppressed bourgeois women from the perspective of, and by analogy with male proletarian struggle" (Taylor 1979, 87). Their shared economic dependence on male masters and their powerlessness renders them invisible but potentially dangerous for the structure of power. The disruptive potential of women equals the Luddites' revolt, which threatens the power of bourgeois men. Shirley and Caroline advocate as much for equality between men and women as equal treatment of the workers and relief for the poor. The author describes both women and the poor as incapable of fitting into the rules imposed by the strict Victorian society and the heartless Utilitarian ideology.

For this reason, it is possible for women (at least in fiction) to feel immediate sympathy for the poor and connect with them on a personal level. The identification of women with workers in Condition of England novels supports the idea that women are the ideal mediators of class conflicts.[127] In *North and South*, Margaret is also symbolically associated with the working class.[128] Gaskell's identification of women with the working class explains the final marriage between Margaret and Thornton. Their marriage, represented as a relationship between equals, becomes a model for

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[127] Different critics comment on the identification of women with the disenfranchised working class; see in particular Rosemarie Bodenheimer, *The Politics of Story in Victorian Social Fiction*, 1988, and Joseph A. Kestner, *Protest and Reform: The British Social Narrative by Women, 1827-1867*, 1985.

[128] Through the portrayal of an exemplary woman visitor, Gaskell depicts a space for women in society that is both private and public. Like Gaskell, many women novelists in Victorian times used the social novel to send a message about the role of women in society. Women writers wanted to push for social reform, both in the public and private areas, to seek the betterment of living conditions for the working class with which they identified (see Kestner 1985).

class relations. It opposes the traditional marriage of the time, where women were in a subordinate position, excluded from owning any properties, in the same way as "hands" with their masters (Elliott Williams 1994, 46). The marriage between Margaret and Thornton aims to mitigate this concept: "The relationship of Margaret and Thornton follows the formula that *North and South* gives for class harmony: familiarity with the other's language leads to understanding, which leads to affection and cooperation." (Elliott Williams 1994, 48). Their relationship is based on communication (the importance of "speaking the same language"), love, and mutual support, setting the example for class interactions.

Condition of England and Brexit novels share the choice of representing women characters as mediators across the divide. The characters analysed are, at the same time, outsiders and insiders: they are marginalised, but they are also standing in a position of relative power. They can make themselves heard thanks to their linguistic intelligence, sensibility, and kindness. These women stand at the centre of the rift that divides the nation. They can reach either side of it, mediating, creating meaningful relationships and bridging the gap between different ways of intending the world. The choice of employing female characters has various reasons. First, depicting female characters endowed with stereotypical feminine sensitivity and, simultaneously, acute intelligence enables the authors to show the possibility of a union between heart and rationality. Both are considered indispensable to reading the world and creating a better society. Second, women have the potential to counter the dominant male discourse. Their position as subordinate to the male power reconfigures these characters as the Other. In this way, they come to substitute the Other (the poor or the foreign Other) and represent the possibility of a relationship with it. In the two Brexit novels analysed (*Winter* and *Spring*), the fact that the two female characters are foreign reinforces this substitution. The confrontation with the immigrant Other becomes central to the Brexit discourse, and as analysed in the next section, it is one of the major themes explored in Brexit novels.

3.5 The Invisible Other: The Representation of Migrants.

The processes of Otherisation represented in Brexit novels are various and go beyond the classic postcolonial meaning of the term. In some of the novels analysed, the concept expresses the marginalisation and exclusion determined by class and gender.

Furthermore, several Brexit novels take into account the discriminatory language and behaviour perpetrated against the racialised and foreign Other. These novels engage with the theme of immigration, representing the encounter with the Other and its possible outcomes. Indeed, the question of migrants has been central to the Brexit debate. Public concerns over immigration levels have been the leading cause of the vote for Brexit and have been a determinant in shaping British attitudes towards the EU (Goodwin and Milazzo 2017, 451). The Leave side, in particular, exploited the fear of immigration to campaign for the exit from the EU.

During the Brexit referendum campaign, the debate surrounding immigration focused on two aspects. The first was the question of borders, especially the intra-European ones. Since the entry of the UK into the European Union, EU citizens have been free to travel, work and live in Great Britain. After the 2004 EU enlargement, which welcomed some Eastern European countries such as Poland and Romania into the Union, the flux of European migrants to Great Britain increased. Around 3 million European citizens lived in the UK at the time of the referendum. Poland and Romania were the top countries of origin of EU nationals living in the UK (and they still are nowadays, even if the numbers significantly dropped after the referendum).[129] Migrants from these countries were falsely accused of stealing British jobs, filling up the GPs' offices and schools, and living off benefits.[130] They were also seen as the cause of a wage drop and an augmented harshening in the general living conditions. The media (especially populist newspapers and tabloids) have been central in creating and crystallising these distorted opinions about migrants (see Blinder and Jeannet 2018).[131] The Leave side, guided by UKIP, used these same prejudices to campaign for Brexit. The EU open border policy was targeted as the main reason for the rise in the number of migrants. Only by leaving the EU could Great Britain regain control of its borders.

The second point of the debate focused on illegal immigration. The rhetoric against European migrants was the same used against other forms of immigration from

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[129] For more data, see the Migration Observatory's website:
https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/eu-migration-to-and-from-the-uk/.

[130] As Deborah Sogelola argues in her analysis of the *Daily Mail* headlines, several tabloids and newspapers strengthened the (erroneous) link between the increase in immigration numbers and a supposed scarcity of jobs and financial resources (such as benefits). These claims were never supported by any proof. See Deborah Sogelola, "Agenda Setting and Framing of Immigration in the Media: The Case of the Daily Mail", 2018.

[131] In particular, there was a widespread misconception promoted by the media about the size of the number of migrants, as will be analysed further.

non-EU countries. The 2015 refugee crisis, which followed the escalation of the war in Syria, augmented the sense of threat towards uncontrolled immigration. In 2018, the infamous Windrush Scandal, which caused the deportation of several second and third-generation migrants from Africa and the Caribbean, was a clear example of the backlash against foreign citizens. Interestingly, the Leave rhetoric ambiguously played on the overlap between EU and extra-European immigration and between legal and illegal migrants (Shaw 2021, 144). A case in point was the "Breaking Point" poster. Even if Nigel Farage presented it as propaganda against the EU and the open borders policy, it showed a photo of a long line of Syrian refugees waiting at the Serbian border. The Leave side used the racialised Other depicted in the poster to provoke a fear of invasion in the voters. This fear of invasion, as described by Fintan O'Toole, connects the paradoxical feeling of loss which followed the Second World War[132] and the end of the Empire. After these historical events, the anti-immigration sentiment was aimed at Afro-Caribbean and South Asian migrants, embodying the fear of the Empire "striking back".[133] The Brexiteers' rhetoric compared these unarmed invaders to the EU, which is equally a form of unarmed invasion (O'Toole 2018, 93-94). It is not surprising that the Brexit debate juxtaposed these two images. The EU turned into the perfect scapegoat for unresolved historical anxieties, becoming the recipient of hate and fear against the Other.

This intersecting of discourses around immigration converged and sometimes crystallised in the novel's narrative form. As Christine Berberich argues in her volume *Brexit and the Migrant Voice, EU Citizens in Post-Brexit Literature and Culture* (2023), even if immigration was the pivotal theme in the referendum's run-up, it is less prominent than expected in Brexit literature. Migrants (in particular Europeans) are often minor flat characters, used as a counterpart to the British protagonists to show their attitudes toward immigration (Berberich 2023, 35). This silencing of migrant

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[132] Even if Great Britain won the Second World War, O'Toole explains how the conflict resulted in a feeling of loss in the British minds. In fact, after the war, even if victorious, Great Britain did not see the expected economic results. Germany, instead, became an economic power after the war. This resulted in a sense of "heroic failure" for the British, which unites a sense of heroism for the victory and of failure for not having obtained anything from it. In this idea, the EU becomes an extension of Germany, and therefore of the Nazis. See Fintan O'Toole, *Heroic Failure*, 2018.

[133] In 1982, Salman Rushdie used the phrase "The Empire Writes Back" in an article published in *The Times*. The phrase was a wordplay based on the movie *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back*. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin later adopted Rushdie's phrase to describe postcolonial writers who challenge the power of imperial discourse. In their pioneering work, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literatures* (1989), the authors explore postcolonial literature, focusing on the disruptive potential of rewriting canonical English texts.

characters has the consequence of reinforcing previous stereotypes and preventing any deep understanding of the cultural differences (Shaw 2021, 147). In the novels, the theme of immigration appears in the background, exemplifying the tense and violent social and political climate after the referendum. In Ali Smith's *Autumn*, for instance, the racist backlash that followed the referendum is faintly shown through racist graffiti in the provincial village where the protagonist, Elisabeth, lives: "The village is in a sullen state. Elisabeth passes a cottage not far from the bus stop whose front, from the door to across above the window, has been painted over with black paint and the words GO and HOME." (Smith 2016, 41). Also, the novel registers the increase in hate speech against Europeans:

> Meanwhile she thinks about her trip here, most of all about the Spanish couple in the taxi queue at the station.
> They'd clearly just arrived here on holiday, their luggage round their feet. The people behind them in the queue shouted at them. What they shouted at them was to go home.
> This isn't Europe, they shouted. Go back to Europe.
> The people standing in front of the Spanish people in the taxi queue were nice; they tried to defuse it by letting the Spanish people take the next taxi. All the same Elisabeth sensed that what was happening in that one passing incident was a fraction of something volcanic.
> This is what shame feels like, she thinks. (Smith 2016, 85)

Elisabeth has the impression that the event she witnessed is not isolated and that the referendum released the racism inherent in much of the British people. In the six months after the referendum, the number of hate crimes with racist motives increased by 23% (Merriman 2018, 607). Racist people felt empowered by the violent language against migrants used during the campaign, both by the media and the politicians.

Jonathan Coe, in *Middle England*, also depicts the violence against migrants. The novel includes only one foreign character, the Lithuanian maid Grete. She is the victim of a racist attack when a man hears her speaking her native language on the phone:

> He shouted, "Get off your effing phone," and then just as we were both outside the door he grabbed me by the arm and said, "Who are you speaking to?" and

"What language were you speaking?" I shouted, "Let go of me," but he just repeated, "What effing language were you speaking?", and then "We speak English in this country," and then he called me a Polish bitch. I didn't say anything, I wasn't going to correct him, I'm used to people thinking that I'm Polish anyway, I just wanted to ignore him, but he didn't stop there, now he grabbed my phone and took it off me and threw it on the ground and started stamping on it. […] He kept saying Polish this and Polish that – I can't repeat the actual words he used – and told me "We don't have to put up with you … people anymore" […] and then he spat at me. Actually spat. (Coe 2018, 378)

This episode portrays the ignorance which fuels racism. The guy, a drunken bully, immediately qualifies the woman as Polish, the usual target of the hate speech touted in the media. He underlines how, after Brexit, he feels entitled to harass and insult those who are different: "We don't have to put up with you… people anymore". Grete appears prominently only in this scene, fading into the background of the other (British) characters. She is a flat character whose personality, aspirations and history are not disclosed in the story. Her function in the novel is only to outline Helena's racism. Helena, Ian's conservative mother and Grete's employer, despises Grete and decides to fire her only on account of her nationality. When this happens, Ian confronts her and defends Grete, a gesture that will earn him Sophie's affection. In all these events, Grete does not have any agency. Her presence in the story is functional to the other characters' development. The author exclusively portrays her as a victim – of the racist attack and of Helena's prejudices. She can only find safety through the actions of Ian and Benjamin, who later decides to hire her as his maid at the writing school. In this way, the only immigrant character in the story is again silenced and marginalised, described from the outside and deprived of self-determination.

The marginalisation of the EU migrant voice is also detectable in Amanda Craig's *The Lie of the Land*. The novel depicts the oppositional feelings of the inhabitants of an isolated village in Devon against migrants. Xan, the mixed-race son of one of the protagonists, is the victim of racism and prejudice. When he finds a job in the local pie factory, he immediately gets confused for an illegal immigrant who cannot speak English. In the factory, he confronts the backwards ideas of the villagers who look at foreign labourers, especially the Polish, with prejudice and blame them for a decrease in their salary. Maddy, a local woman employed in the pie factory,

comments: "'I'm not saying they're not good workers, but nobody does this job for long. Free health care, free education, child benefit, who wouldn't jump at it? Plenty of little Polish kids in local schools.'" (Craig 2017, 70). The author tries to counterbalance the voices of the Devonian villagers by representing a group of Polish workers, especially Katya, who starts a romantic relationship with Xan. Unfortunately, although the author tries to show an empathetic engagement with these characters and refrains from any negative connotation, their representation is still stereotyping. They are described from the point of view of Xan, who sees Polish men as: "larger, tougher, more pale and more male than he, with their giant sausage-fed muscles, clipped heads and practical expertise at any kind of job." (Craig 2017, 186). This portrayal also digs into the typical stereotypes of Polish as clean, proud, and racist against British people: "'Not like Polish peoples,' is a refrain he hears, uttered with a mixture of regret and satisfaction. 'English peoples so dirty. You can't even cook.'" (Craig 2017, 261). Katya's characterisation, as well, even when meant to deconstruct stereotypes about Eastern European migrants, ends up reinforcing them (Berberich 2023, 38). She repeats the common idea of the hard-working Polish people, but her character lacks depth. She is described as cold, ignorant, and only interested in making money, racialising the same Xan for his skin colour. Her character disappears at one point in the book, missing the opportunity for any development or empathetic identification. Katya is configured as a minor personage whose function is to support the British protagonists. Her story is underdeveloped, and her precarious situation is depicted from the outside, encouraging a superficial representation of migrants.

Similarly, Condition of England novels tend to under-represent and silence migrant characters. Even if the purpose of this subgenre is to present the country's condition realistically, it is impossible not to note the prominent absence of the Empire from the pages of Condition of England novels. In the Early Victorian age, the Empire was a fundamental actor in the British world, and it was the centre of production of the resources that were then manufactured in the main industrial cities in England. Even so, in Condition of England novels, the Empire is just a distant echo, barely mentioned in relation to the centre (England), where the action takes place.[134] The narrative focuses inward, investigating the problems of British society. The only

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[134] For instance, in *North and South*, there is a short scene where Margaret and her cousin are wearing Indian shawls. The Empire is only represented as a place of production for luxury and exotic objects.

visible presence of the colonial stance in Condition of England novels is the appearance of Irish workers. As the migrant characters in Brexit novels, the Irish depicted in Condition of England novels are secondary or silent. Their presence is limited to a few scenes. They are connotated as a group by their nationality and deprived of individuality. In *North and South*, for example, the Irish are "imported" by Thornton to work at his mill instead of the strikers. Even if they are represented as victims, probably trying to push for compassion, they are described almost as animals. They get frightened by the strikers' threat, and when these attack the mill, the Irish' reaction is similar to that of a scared herd. Their voices are heard only as inarticulate sounds: "They are crying and shouting as if they are mad with fright" (Gaskell 1854, 175). Their irrationality is opposed to the calm and rational attitude of Thornton, the master: "There, they declared, they would not stop; they claimed to be sent back. And so he had to think, and talk, and reason." (Gaskell 1854, 176). The Irish workers are depicted as the property of a master who manages them. Their role within the narrative is to serve the main industrial plot. The presence of the Irish exacerbates the anger of local workers, who feel frustrated about being replaced:

> They were consequently surprised and indignant at the poor Irish, who had allowed themselves to be *imported* and *brought over* to take their places. This indignation was tempered, in some degree, by contempt for '*them* Irishers' and by pleasure at the idea of the bungling way in which they would set to work, and perplex their new masters with their *ignorance* and *stupidity*, strange exaggerated stories of which were already spreading through the town. (Gaskell 1854, 224 italics mine)

The language with which Milton's workers address the Irish people is not so far from the one used nowadays against other migrants. Irish workers are not seen as people. They are "imported", like goods or tools that cannot even do the job properly, given their proverbial stupidity and incapacity. These prejudices, circulating in "exaggerated stories", signal the distance between "us" (Milton's workers, ready to fight for their rights) and "them" (Irish workers, so useless and miserable that they let the master exploit them). In the novel, the Irish perspective is never shown. Their actions and feelings are always mediated through third parties who talk about them and act in their name. They are in the background, pushed to the remote corners of the mill and of the

narrative, "You may see them huddled in that top room in the mill" (Gaskell 1854, 168). Their presence in *North and South* demonstrates the insularity of the British workers and masters, reaffirming that the British must come first in dealing with labour issues (Cammack 2016, 114).

This representation is in line with the stereotype of the Irish workers at the time. In *Sybil*, Disraeli mentions the presence of Irish immigrants: "'Ah! Them's the immigrants,' said Caroline; 'they're sold out of slavery, and sent down by Pickford's van into the labour market to bring down our wages.'" (Disraeli, 113). The mill labourer Caroline complains that the presence of unskilled Irish workers is causing wages to drop for English workers. On another point, Gerard, the weaver who becomes the head of the Chartist protests, remarks:

> I speak of the annual arrival of more than three hundred thousand strangers in this island. How will you feed them? How will you clothe them? How will you house them? They have given up butcher's meat; must they give up bread? And as for raiment and shelter, the rags of the kingdom are exhausted and your sinks and cellars already swarm like rabbit warrens. […] Every now and then, there came two or three hundred thousand strangers out of the forests and crossed the mountains and rivers. They come to us every year and in greater numbers. What are your invasions of the barbarous nations, your Goths and Visigoths, your Lombards and Huns, to our Population Returns! (Disraeli, 157-158)

In Gerard's words, the arrival of migrants is perceived as an invasion. Gerard thinks that "three hundred thousand strangers" arrive annually in Great Britain, a number wholly disproportionated, but which agrees with a typical bias people develop towards immigration. Both quotes show two common prejudices at the time: that immigrants were coming in great numbers to invade the country and that they contributed to cuts in wages and general wealth. Interestingly, a similar rhetoric was used in the years before the referendum on Brexit.

As Blinder and Jeannet argue, there is a phenomenon called "imagined immigration", which usually differs in size and characteristics from the real one. People tend to overestimate the number of migrants coming to the country, consequently feeling threatened (Blinder and Jeannet 2018, 1446), and media reinforce these distorted images of immigration. As Deborah Sogelola demonstrates through her

analysis of the *Daily Mail*'s headlines, the newspaper tended to present startling figures of the number of people allegedly coming into the country and then attributed these figures to supposed experts without any source (Sogelola 2018, 137). Exactly like in the words of Walter Gerard about immigrants in the nineteenth century, in 2016, migrants were believed to "sneak into Britain at a rate of one every six minutes" (Dathan 2016).[135] Similarly, newspapers and tabloids were insinuating that immigration contributed to a perceived scarcity of jobs. These messages were effective because they fed on established stereotypes (Sogelola 2018, 138). As the quotes from *Sybil* show, these stereotypes were ingrained in the British public discourse long before Brexit came into play.

Brexit novels have echoed these stereotypes with the purpose of criticising the media's exploitation of themes such as immigration. For instance, *Perfidious Albion* openly attacks the media's influence in shaping political consensus. The character of Hugo Bennington and his populist articles in *The Record* (which is reminiscent of the real *Daily Mail*) epitomise the populist and racist rhetoric perpetrated by media:

> From the pages of *The Record*, a near-dystopian vision of England emerged. The country was overrun, under threat, increasingly incapable. Hordes of immigrants massed at its borders. Its infrastructure frayed at the seams. Basic morality was eroding at an alarming rate, worn down by tolerance, permissiveness, turpitude. Darkin found this both terrifying and reassuring. Like any long-standing *Record* reader, he read not to have his fears assuaged, but to have them confirmed. (Byers 2018, 24)

England is described as a country that is being invaded, with long lines of migrants pushing at the borders, like the ones in the "Breaking Point" poster. The external threat pairs with an internal weakness caused by a "politically correct" elite, which tolerates any immorality. Darkin, who in the book represents the left behind and Leave voter, is entirely at the mercy of what is written in *The Record*:

> His [Darkin's] head was full of worrisome scenarios, most of which he'd picked up from *The Record*. He pictured himself opening the door a crack, peering round,

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[135] This is just one of many examples, relating to an article published in the *Daily Mail* on June 10th, 2016. For other examples, see Deborah Sogelola, "Agenda Setting and Framing of Immigration in the Media: The Case of the Daily Mail", 2018.

only for it to be forced back in his face, knocking him on the floor. Men in balaclavas would burst in. *Their voices would be Polish or black*. (Byers 2018, 36, italics are mine)

The act of reading reinforces the stereotyped ideas that Darkin has of the country, "he read not to have his fears assuaged, but to have them confirmed" (Byers 2018, 24). He fears foreign people, "Polish or black", who, in his mind, are dangerous, violent, and coming to attack defenceless English people. The importance of the media in moulding public opinion is at the centre of Byers' satire. It is clear from the beginning that Bennington is adopting a mystifying rhetoric. The press and its representatives appear corrupt, and the idea of England they want to convey through the media serves their personal interests. The stereotypes of migrants adopted in the pages of the fictional journal and repeated in the words of Bennington are inspired by the same used during the Brexit campaign. The author aims to criticise the falsely constructed image of migrants through the representation of Trina, a black girl who is supposed to represent a different, more open-minded, and cosmopolitan way of living. After writing an ironic tweet, Trina becomes the victim of hate speech from Bennington, who accuses her of being a "dangerous extremist threatening the English way of life" (Byers 2018, 173). Unfortunately, Trina's character is not well-developed. The perception is that her description is superficial, and there is no deep involvement in her feelings and ideas. When Bennington attacks her, she counteracts and damages the politician's public image. At the same time, her point of view and her personal history are only hinted at; she is a stereotyped representation of the country's multicultural youth, which does not fit in an ethnically homogeneous national discourse. The author aims to create an identification with Trina, but even if she is fundamental in the plot, her character is flat.[136]

Lux and Florence, in the second and third instalments of Smith's novels, are an exception to the representation and silencing of migrant characters. The representation of the two girls promotes conviviality based on personal relationships. The narrative form is the designated space to create and represent patterns of convivial identification. Lux, in *Winter*, is a European migrant. She and her family fled from Croatia because of the war. Florence, instead, is a young black girl, the daughter of illegal immigrants.

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[136] In contrast, Darkin's character is well-rounded, and the author manages to create an empathetic identification with him.

Their stories remain mostly unknown, but the girls are endowed with strong agency. They are crucial to showing the potential of art, imagination, and sympathy to deconstruct monolithic identities. As argued before, they represent the topos of the spectral Other, and their mysterious characterisation enables them to disrupt preconceived ideas of identity. Their origin and direction are unknown; they can enter and exit the other characters' lives, putting them in the condition to practice hospitality.[137]

This theme is fully explored through Florence in *Spring*, in which Smith investigates the theme of immigration, presenting the reality of an IRC, an Immigration Removal Centre. These facilities (which are not fictional) are built to host illegal immigrants for 72 hours upon their arrival. Even if they are intended for short-term stays, some people are detained there for months or years. Smith draws her inspiration from testimonies of the Windrush Scandal. The author shows the Kafkaesque (and openly racist) immigration policies practised in Great Britain in the last few years.[138] The description of the IRC comes from Brittany (whose name symbolically hints at Great Britain itself), a guard in the facility. She describes the place as a kind of "underworld", a "place of the living dead" (Smith 2019, 132). The process of detention deprives the detainees of their rights, their freedom, and their humanity, metaphorically transforming them into "living dead" and isolating them from their families and the outside world.

The only power that the prisoners maintain is language.[139] Brittany comments,

> In Spring House with all its languages, and it is a horrible feeling when you can't speak a language and aren't in charge of or superior to the person who's speaking it, who might be saying anything at all and you haven't a fucking clue and no right to tell them to be quiet or choose to ignore them. (Smith 2019, 304)

Language is power, and the confrontation with the foreign Other, symbolised by the encounter with a different language, puts the self and its relative position of power into

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[137] "In the novels of Ali Smith, however, and elsewhere in her work, the arrival of the 'guest' precipitates a loss of mastery that can, through gestures of radical love and empathy, reconfigure social norms and intersubjective bonds." (Germanà and Horton 2013, 55).

[138] Smith engages with the same theme, portraying an IRC and reporting the real condition of refugees in "The Detainees' Tale", included in the volume of short stories *The Refugee Tales*, edited by David Herd and Anna Pincus (2016).

[139] As already commented elsewhere, the focus on language as world-making is central in Smith's work.

question. Correspondingly, inside the IRC, the detainees are called "deets", like the insect repellent used to kill parasites. This enables an inversion of the rhetoric often used to describe migrants: the detainees are the parasite repellent, and the guards are the parasites.[140] Brittany remarks, "You calling them deets makes us the insects" (Smith 2019, 134). The encounter with the dehumanised Other inside the IRC makes Brittany feel inhuman. Brittany's colleague mentions the dangers of meeting the Other: "…you got to be careful with Deet. Your speech can get slurred, you can feel really sick, it's a neurotoxin, under your skin going right into you." (Smith 2019, 134). This perception of being poisoned and self-dissolving is visible in Brittany, who, as a defence mechanism towards the Other, clings to the idea of borders represented by the hedges of the IRC, "the gate to her underworld" (Smith 2019, 132). The hedges are the limit between the self and the Other within, separating her world and the IRC "underworld". Brittany has taken the habit of nodding at them and mentally greeting them: "Every day now, going into work then leaving for home at the end of the shift, she nodded at them, DMZ between underworld and the rest of the world. Hello, hedges. (Wish me luck.) Goodbye, hedges. (Another day done.)." (Smith 2019, 132).

This mental habit temporarily changes when Brittany meets Florence, whose unexpected arrival opens Brittany to the possibility of hospitality:

> The girl [Florence] is like someone or something out of a legend or a story, the kind of story that on the one hand isn't really about real life but on the other is the only way you ever really understand anything about real life. She makes people behave like they should, or like they live in a different better world. (Smith 314)

The chance of creating a human relationship with the foreign Other, epitomised by Florence, makes Brittany believe in a better version of herself. Florence is like someone "out of a legend or a story", representing the power of imaginative narration to shape reality and "really understand anything about real life". Their encounter exemplifies "the relationship between transgressive imagination and prescriptive national imaginary through linguistic play." (Masterson 2020, 368). Florence's

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[140] As David Farrier argues, "A common feature of negative rhetoric about asylum seekers takes the form of their denigration as parasites upon the host nation." (Farrier 2011, 126). See David Farrier, *Postcolonial Asylum: Seeking Sanctuary Before the Law*, 2011.

linguistic creativity confronts Brittany's dogmatism and aims to deconstruct her attachment to rigid social rules in favour of compassion. Florence is "clever with words" (Smith 2019, 310) and even changes their meaning. Initially, Brittany welcomes this linguistic play, happily condescending to Florence's creativity. But at the end of the novel, Brittany decides to denounce Florence to the immigration authorities after convincing herself that the girl was only using her. Brittany is a metaphor for Great Britain in her ambivalent behaviour towards the foreign Other (Florence), illustrating the change in the British attitude towards immigration. In the past, Great Britain was known for its multiculturality and openness. Today, it seems to be rejecting those values and closing itself against the Other. Brittany is even more isolated after having betrayed Florence. She seems even more obsessed with borders, holding to their materiality by taking home some branches from the hedges at the entrance of the IRC. The parable of this character is the parable of a country, Great Britain, that, in recent years, has chosen nationalist and nativist ideals over multiculturalism and hospitality. In Smith's novel, Great Britain becomes a symbol of inhospitality and closed borders. As one unknown migrant says in the novel: "Welcome to a country in which you are not welcome" (Smith 2019, 272).

The question of borders, of material and immaterial walls erected to keep the Other out, is central to another Brexit novel: John Lanchester's *The Wall*. The novel engages extensively with the question of migrants through the speculative form of dystopia. In a future destroyed by climate change, where the sea has submerged most of the lands, Great Britain tries to preserve its privilege by building a massive wall around its coasts, effectively excluding whoever is not British. Even if the author talks about the novel as climate fiction, it is impossible not to read the wall in the novel as a symbol of the inhospitable environment of present-day Great Britain.[141] Desperate refugees risking their lives crossing the Channel in small boats at night, politicians inciting fear of immigration, and denouncing the "traitors" who contest the harsh policies and "take the side of the Others" (Lanchester 2019, 86), all point to Brexit Britain (Allardice 2019). The novel features the young Kavanagh, who is obliged to stand guard on the Wall. The enemies are called, suggestively, the Others: climate refugees looking for safe land. They come "in rowing boats and rubber dinghies, on

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[141] The reference goes back in history to the Berlin Wall. It also refers to other modern-day strong borders, like Fortress Europe, which is responsible for hundreds of deaths every day in the Mediterranean Sea, and the border between the USA and Mexico.

inflatable tubes, in groups and in swarms and in couples, in threes, in singles; […] they are clever, they are desperate, they are ruthless, they are fighting for their lives…" (Lanchester 2019, 30). They resemble the migrants crossing the Channel during the migration crisis, only that, in the novel, the Defenders who guard the Wall are authorised to kill them. The Wall itself, which separates the ins and outs, us and them, becomes a character in the narrative, occupying with its concrete body the time and space of the novel (Sandrock 2020, 166). It is "a long low concrete monster" (Lanchester 2019, 9), which can only be described through metaphors and poetry, especially concrete poetry.[142] Its function is to define the Others, the threat that comes from the outside, in opposition to the entitled British people, "the best in the world" (Lanchester 2019, 85). The already mentioned fear of invasion pervades the first part of the novel. The idea that "the Others are coming" in "big numbers, dangerous numbers" (Lanchester 2019, 85) is the main preoccupation of the protagonist and his fellow Defenders.

The first half of the novel focuses on Kavanagh, who is inside the Wall. The Others are an unknown and threatening entity that does not possess a voice or a face (Berberich 2023, 40). The positions get inverted in the second part of the story. When a group of Others manages to get over the Wall, the law demands that an equal number of Defenders be expelled from the country. Kavanagh and his group become the Others. They have to survive in the sea, looking for a place to land. Luckily, at one point, they encounter a flotilla of boats. This floating community is composed of the same people that Kavanagh always identified as Others, who welcome Kavanagh and his companions into their organised and co-dependent community. The encounter brings the protagonist to reflect on the relative sense of being Others:

> I'd been brought up not to think about the Others in terms of where they came from or who they were, to ignore all that- they were just the Others. But maybe, now that I was one of them, they weren't the Others any more? If I was an Other and they were Others perhaps none of us were Others but instead we were a new Us. (Lanchester 2019, 147)

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[142] Concrete poems seek to match the shape of their stanzas with the actual shape of the thing they describe.

The encounter with the Others allows a relativisation of identity. The message is clear: the dichotomy "us vs them" is only a question of sheer luck, of being born on the right side of the Wall (Berberich 2023, 41). Moreover, the fact that the people in the rafts accept Kavanagh and his companions without asking any further questions hints at more welcoming forms of belonging, as opposed to the insular and hostile rhetoric taught to Kavanagh since he was a child. Similarly, at the end of the novel, Kavanagh and his lover, Hifa, are saved by a mysterious hermit living on an oil rig. The act of hospitality offered by the hermit hints at the possibility of a renewed sense of home. The story ends with a new beginning, the start of a story, a narration, as opposed to the Wall, where "there isn't much narrative" (Lanchester 2019, 16). In fact, in the last scene, Hifa asks Kavanagh to tell her a story. The protagonist thinks that "a story is something that turns out all right" (Lanchester 2019, 195) and proceeds to start telling his own story, the one narrated in the novel, which "began like this: 'It's cold on the Wall.'" (Lanchester 2019, 195).

The question of borders, central in *The Wall*, is linked to the idea of Great Britain as an island nation. As a natural border, the sea has been a fundamental symbol of British cultural identity (Sandrock 2020, 176). The novel directly converses with this tradition. On the oil rig, Kavanagh finds Shakespeare's collected works, a relic of the English past that seems to be disappearing.[143] *The Wall* accounts for an exhausted society clinging to modern Western living standards in a world destroyed by climate change. The tedium experienced by Kavanagh on the Wall is also the condition of the ghost culture he inhabits (Hartland 2019). This shattered society preserves detrimental symbols of nostalgic Englishness, like the pub that Kavanagh and his companions visit in the lake district. The place is described as the typical English country pub, an "old-time fantasy of an English inn" (Lanchester 2019, 57), a symbol of an idyllic past that no longer exists.[144] The nostalgia for an unreachable past, destroyed by the Change, is strictly linked to the rhetoric against the Others who threaten a particular way of life, even if such a way of life never really existed. The novel recovers the nostalgic narrative that was central as a counterpoint to the fear of invasion in the Brexit referendum campaign. Lanchester criticises the heartless immigration policies and the

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[143] The famous image of the "sceptred isle," frequently recalled in the Brexit rhetoric, comes from John of Gaunt's monologue in *Richard III*.

[144] In the novel, the feeling of nostalgia leads to generational hate among young people for their parents and grandparents: "The olds feel they irretrievably fucked up the world, then allowed us to be born into it. You know what? It's true." (Lanchester 2019, 55).

mystifying rhetoric of political discourse. The Brexit rhetoric promoted the protection of Great Britain's borders against a supposed invader, evoking a sense of nostalgia attached to an idealised English tradition.

The concept of Englishness and the exploitation of an invented English past have been pivotal in the Brexit discourse. The Brexit debate focused on themes such as immigration, sovereignty, social disparities, and political control. All these themes are explored in Brexit novels, implementing the same interest in conversing with society and promoting social change that was central in Condition of England novels. Moreover, all these topics relate to the crucial issue of national identity, particularly English national identity. The unsettlement of the English question and the politicisation of English nationalism have been crucial matters leading up to the referendum. In this context, the Brexit novel becomes a fundamental tool to reflect upon the state of the nation but also to offer a counter-narrative to the political discourse about English national identity. Brexit novels aim to represent and analyse the present society, trying to orientate in a moment of profound social changes. At the same time, they promote a new image of the national community based on personal relationships, solidarity, and hospitality. As Sara Upstone argues: "The literary text is a fundamental part of a cultural imaginary – a way of thinking about the world." (Eaglestone 2018, 45). Literary works, especially novels, have always been a pivotal means of constructing the national discourse. Through narration, Brexit novels imagine a more welcoming nation, potentially creating an alternative national discourse. The chapter which follows investigates all this.

CHAPTER 4

Unravelling English National Identity in Narration

> 'It's always an adventure.
> You never know what you're going to find.
> Sometimes it's good, sometimes it's nasty,
> a lot of the time it's as weird as hell.
> But that's England for you. We're stuck with it.'
> (Coe 2018, 76)

4.1 The Brexit Nation and The Brexit Novel: Representing National Identity in Times of Crisis

The previous chapter analysed and compared, through textual references, the main themes of Condition of England novels and Brexit novels. The motifs of the national divide, the condition of the poor, the disenfranchised and the left behind, and the representation of immigration and migrant characters emerge in both subgenres, showing their respective connection with moments of profound social and political crisis. These themes should not be considered separate units but concurrent discourses that connect with the underlying interrogation about the present state of the nation, which is the main subject of the two subgenres. Therefore, having examined the various themes separately, a focus on how they engage in the broader discourse of nation formation is now in order.

The question of national identity has been a central factor in determining the outcome of the Brexit referendum. In particular, the Leave campaign has focused on exploiting a reinvented English national identity (as will be argued later). The question of English nationalism has always been a political conundrum. The first section of this chapter investigates how the occlusion of Englishness inside a political and imperial Britishness has caused the formation of an English national identity attached to conservative and nostalgic ideas. The fall of the Empire generated a "post-imperial

melancholia" (see Gilroy, 2004), which increased the English people's sense of bewilderment also owing to the advent of globalisation and the entrance into the European Union. The loss of centrality of the United Kingdom in the world political arena was followed by the devolutionary movements. The absence of devolved regulations for England engendered a widespread sense of invisibility in the English people and largely contributed to an identity crisis. All these causes concurred with the general political and economic crisis and became one of the main reasons for the Leave victory in the Brexit referendum. The Brexiteers took advantage of the politicisation of English nationalism – provoked by the long-standing identity crisis – and appealed to the sense of disorientation and nostalgia which afflicted many voters. The promise of the reconstitution of an Empire 2.0 outside Europe contributed to making Brexit possible.

The importance of English nationalism in the Brexit event promoted a renewed interest in the question of Englishness and English national identity. The second section of the chapter explores literature's paramount role in forming national identity. In particular, it focuses on the centrality of English literature in representing the nation. This idea is substantiated by different critical studies, such as Homi Bhabha's *Nation and Narration* (1990), Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, Patrick Parrinder's *Nation and Novel: The English Novel from its Origin to the Present Day* (2006), Michael Gardiner's *The Constitution of English Literature: The State, the Nation and the Canon* (2013), and Krishan Kumar's *The Making of English National Identity* (2003). English Literature has always functioned as an implicit sociology, investigating the nation through narration. The repetition of certain sets of images of the nation through time makes literature one of the main tools in creating the nation itself. Literature, particularly the novel, perpetuates representations of the nation, contributing to the formation of national identity. Brexit novels and Condition of England novels – the two subgenres investigated in the thesis – testify to the extent to which literature engages with social and political issues and contributes to imagining alternative versions of the nation.

One of the chief rhetorical means exploited in the Leave campaign was the celebration of England's glorious past. The third section analyses the central role of the nostalgic discourse in the Brexit referendum and its direct link with the idea of Englishness. The section then considers the representation of the past in Condition of England novels and Brexit novels. In Condition of England novels, the nostalgia for

an idealised, idyllic past is compared with the corrupted present. In Disraeli's *Sybil*, the celebration of the past is functional to the author's hope for a return to a feudal system based on the strong administration of the Church and the Crown and the collaboration between the classes. In Brexit novels, nostalgia and the celebration of the past are criticised. Melissa Harrison's *All Among the Barley* and Sarah Moss' *Ghost Wall* show how the revival of past ways of living and the attachment to tradition always conceals practices of violence, domination, and exclusion. In both novels, the narrative voice is given to two young girls. Thanks to their perspective as victims of a patriarchal and nativist environment, they manage to identify the problems hidden in the nostalgic and nationalist rhetoric.

The last section engages with the representation of simplified symbols of Englishness in Amanda Craig's *The Lie of the Land* and Johnathan Coe's *Middle England*. In both cases, the authors criticise the representation of an alleged quintessential Englishness, trying to deconstruct a monolithic and exclusive idea of England. However, both novels exploit and reinforce the same canonical representations they criticise. In *The Lie of the Land*, the stereotypical depiction of the English countryside is reviewed by acknowledging the real condition of the people living in it (as Disraeli already did in *Sybil*). The presence of poverty and disenfranchisement is, nonetheless, counterbalanced by lyrical descriptions of the natural environment and the resort to the cliched idea of the hospitability of rural communities. In *Middle England*, Coe describes the pervasiveness of simplified symbols of Englishness through the representation of the Woodland Garden Centre, a shop where England is commodified and sold, and the pivotal event of the Olympic opening ceremony. The author represents the importance of these national events through the reaction of the novel's various characters. Even if the stereotypical representation of England is satirised, its presence corroborates the need to address the question of English identity through the recovery and analysis of its most celebratory symbols. Coe's novel also questions the role of literature in creating an alternative political discourse. By representing the nation's present state, Brexit novels offer a space for dialogue and confrontation with the main themes that emerged during the referendum. Additionally, the chapter discusses whether Brexit novels can advance an alternative discourse around national identity, specifically English national identity.

4.2 Brexit was Made in England

National identity was at the core of Brexit, connecting the fear of immigration, the supposed attack on sovereignty from the EU, the internal divisions of the country, the unresolved social inequalities, and the nostalgia for a monolithic and culturally homogeneous past of imperial grandeur. All these themes are corollaries to the deeply rooted question of national identity, specifically English national identity. The Brexit referendum has brought to light the unresolved issue of English nationalism. England provided most of the votes for leaving the European Union,[145] and several commentators linked the choice to vote for Brexit to a stronger English (rather than British) sense of identity (see Enderson et al. 2016). Investigating the question of English national identity is thus essential to understanding the Brexit moment and the future of the United Kingdom.

English nationalism is, in fact, different from any other European nationalism. England has traditionally been "in search of itself" [146] and has been unable to pinpoint a precise notion of what signifies being English and what distinguishes the English people as a nation. In *The Making of English National Identity*, Krishan Kumar examines the unique formation of English nationalism, which he categorises as an "imperial nationalism" with its identity tied to its role as an imperial force (Kumar 2003, 34). Kumar argues that the common conflation of Englishness with Britishness is not only the result of England being the most extensive and populous nation of the kingdom but also a consequence of her self-perception as the centre of an empire. Since the creation of the First Empire (the one in the British Isles), English identity has been attached to the British "super-national" identity to suit the imperial mission. Moreover, as Linda Colley argues in *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (1992), the willingness to subordinate Englishness to a super-imposed Britishness can also be identified as a response to conflict with the European (and Catholic) Other.[147] Tom Nairn maintains, in his seminal work *The Break-up of Britain* (1977), that at the centre of English national identity lies a "void" that results from the delegation of sovereignty

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[145] Of the 17.4 million votes for Leave, 15.2 million came from England.

[146] H.V. Morton describes a quintessential rural Englishness in the 1927 bestseller *In Search of England*. The book remains a prototype in the representation of stereotypical England in the twentieth century.

[147] Colley argues that: "Great Britain did not emerge by way of a 'blending' of the different regional or older national cultures contained within its boundaries as is sometimes maintained, nor is its genesis to be explained primarily in terms of an English 'core' imposing its cultural and political hegemony on a helpless and defrauded Celtic periphery. Instead, Britishness was superimposed over an array of internal differences in response to contact with the Other, and above all in response to conflict with the Other." (Colley 2005, 6).

to Britain and the need "to subordinate national expression to broader domestic and global structures of colonial and imperial power" (Featherstone 2009, 3).

Consequently, the Empire's fall was a pivotal moment in realising the absence of a proper English national identity, an event that triggered a profound identity crisis. From being the centre of the most powerful empire in the world, England found herself diminished. The inheritance of issues of imperialism and postcolonialism are crucial but frequently unarticulated elements of contemporary English national identity (Featherstone 2009, 20). The end of the Empire, and therefore the end of England's imperial identity, is a problem that has never been addressed, compromising the formation of a post-imperial English national identity. In *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture*, Paul Gilroy argues that England's failure to grieve the loss of its empire resulted in the entrapment of nationalist sentiments in mythical images of the past (Gilroy 2004, 97). English national discourse often refers to past moments of heroism and independence.[148] This "erasure of empire from English national consciousness" contributes to feelings of denial, loss, and the creation of defensive forms of English national identity (Featherstone 2009, 23). The inability to elaborate a post-imperial English identity stimulates the rise of an idealised Englishness based on myths of the past. Defending national sovereignty becomes, therefore, central to protecting this backwards-looking and ethnically homogeneous idea of England. The "awkward relationship" with the European Union originates partly from the perceived threat that the multinational formation of the EU poses on exclusive forms of Englishness. The nostalgic rhetoric employed during the Brexit campaign directly stemmed from the frustration for the lost Empire. The unresolved issue of the British colonial past played a central role in configuring Brexit as an opportunity to reconstitute an "Empire 2.0", at the same time evoking the paradoxical image of Great Britain as a European colony (see O'Toole, 2018). This "postimperial melancholia" needs to be addressed by re-imagining an English national identity separated from the imperial one. Far from sticking to an exclusive identity oriented towards the past, England should embrace a more convivial dimension linked to its multicultural characteristics (see Gilroy 2004).

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[148] The English national discourse often adopts a rhetoric linked to the memory of the Second World War and to rural tradition, as will be analysed in the next section.

The feeling of no longer being at the centre of an empire has combined with the more recent one of no longer being the centre of the United Kingdom. The devolutionary movements of the late 90s have contributed to the English identity crisis. While the other British nations, over the centuries, have maintained their own culture and traditions, preserving an idea of nationhood separated from the British one, England occluded its own identity in it. Devolution in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland led to different degrees of independence from Westminster,[149] leaving England questioning its position in the union. England is the only nation with no devolved powers, an issue that triggered the so-called "West Lothian Question", which asked for exclusively English votes on matters that regarded England's administration. EVEL (English Votes for English Laws) was passed in 2015 thanks to the strong support of Conservative and UKIP MPs, an event that bolstered English nationalist sentiments (Shaw 2021, 138).

The weakening of the ties between the four nations of the United Kingdom elicited the emergence of English nationalism in the political arena. In the late 90s, the work of nationalist intellectuals, such as Simon Heffer and Roger Scruton, and the strengthening of the BNP and UKIP's influence were clear responses to the devolutionary movements. Heffer considers the devolutions a chance for England to find its identity, re-imagining itself outside the fabricated British nation (Featherstone 2009, 12). For English nationalists, imagining England means essentially restoring a lost image of its idealised history. Englishness can only be grasped through engagement with traditional ways of living and feeling. The countryside and the rural landscape become the place to experience true Englishness and a refuge from the threats of modern life (Kenny 2015, 41-42). The idealisation of a "persisting, though constantly endangered, premodern rural England" (Featherstone 2009, 13) has been pivotal in imagining the English nation, causing the need to protect it against external influences.

This need to protect English sovereignty results in open hostility towards the idea of European integration, which has been the target of English nationalists since entering the EU (Wellings 2012, 190). English nationalism has always been linked to

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[149] After the referendums on devolution in 1998, Scotland and Wales formed separate parliaments with governing powers in several matters. In Northern Ireland, instead, a devolved parliament has existed since the Home Rule (1921). Still, only after the Good Friday Agreement (1998) the two main parties (Unionist and Nationalist) decided to create a joint government.

a stance of Euroscepticism advertised in the official rhetoric as a defence of Britain's independence.[150] This Euroscepticism emerged as a reaction to the perceived loss of unity inside the UK, redirecting the fear of a break-up of Britain against a common external enemy: the European Union. The entire British identity, in fact, was created around the opposition and conflict against the European Other (Colley 2008, 6). A revival of Eurosceptic ideas could potentially restore a shared British identity. Therefore, the "liberation" of Britain from the EU's control has been associated with conservative forms of Englishness. English nationalists like Scruton, for instance, are critical of the European Union, fearing the creation of a "Europe of the regions" that can erode English sovereignty. What is at stake in all these discourses is the merging of English nationalism with British nationalism (Kenny 2015, 40). Brexiteers took advantage of this intended confusion during the referendum campaign in 2016. The Leave parties redirected the English fear of losing power inside the UK towards the EU and masked it with the protection of Great Britain's independence from Brussels.

Nationalist parties such as the BNP and UKIP embraced the Eurosceptic positions of English nationalism. The parties argued that British autonomy from the EU was essential to prevent Scottish independence. UKIP, in particular, managed to earn consensus by adopting the rhetoric of English nationalism. It proposed a nostalgic idea of England that attracted many voters: strong, independent from the EU, and ethnically homogeneous. UKIP passed from being an extremist, populist party to being the third national political force in the 2015 elections. The success of UKIP signalled the triumph of its nationalist messages, also in traditional Labour voting areas in the north of England and showed the failure of the political elite to address the English question. The liberal political elite, in fact, often mocked and criticised the idea of Englishness and the celebration of English identity as backward and populist. The electoral rise of UKIP urged the Conservative Party to try to control the push of English nationalist parties, appropriating the same Eurosceptic ideas. Protecting Britain against the centralising tendencies of the European Union came to be the main form of expression of English nationalism, endorsed, as well, by Tory political leaders and MPs (Wellings 2012, 191).

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[150] A clear example is the naming of the two parties advocating for English nationalism: the British National Party (BNP) and the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). Their names recall Britain and the United Kingdom while proposing English nationalist ideas: another example of the occlusion of Englishness in Britishness.

Nostalgia for the Empire and the English rural past, the feeling of loss of power caused by devolution and the European membership, and the advent of a multicultural and globalised society are at the core of an English national identity crisis that made Brexit possible. Brexit is a "moment of English nationalism" (Wellings 2019, 3): the consequence of the emergence and politicisation of the English nation after centuries in which the British government has put aside the English question.

> Thus, although the elite rhetoric of Brexit was British, the animating force was English. The numerical preponderance of the English within the United Kingdom ensured that the UK-wide referendum was dominated by English concerns even if England itself rarely featured explicitly in the campaign rhetoric. (Wellings 2019, 172)

As Wellings argues, the Leave parties redirected the voters' concerns about English national identity for their own purposes. Brexiteers exploited the rise of English nationalism while adopting a rhetoric of British exceptionalism and nostalgia. The Leave side appealed to the need of some voters to restore an invented English tradition, which automatically excluded whoever was foreign. Once again, the Empire played a central role. The rehabilitation of the Empire, a central tenet of English nationalism, was fundamental in the Brexit discourse. Configuring Brexit as the possibility of returning to a global Britain, to the Anglosphere, and a lost empire was a way to reappropriate England's role not only in the wider world but also, and most importantly, inside Great Britain. In fact, a central push for this renovated need to "find England" was coming from the centrifugal forces acting inside the United Kingdom. The conservative political elite took advantage of this moment of politicisation of English nationalism to withdraw the United Kingdom from the European Union (Wellings 2019, 4). Brexit corresponded to the emergence of the question of English nationalism in mainstream politics. Even so, after the referendum, the same parties were ready to dismiss the English political community, mobilised during the campaign (Wellings 2019, 160-161). As a result, England remains in search of itself. Exiting the EU instead of cementing the fracture lines inside the United Kingdom, as predicted by UKIP, highlighted the differences between the nations. Brexit provoked calls for a new vote on Scottish independence and reopened the Irish question (the Northern Ireland

post-Brexit protocol remains uncertain), putting Great Britain at a concrete risk of breaking up.

Brexit and its implications in the complex question of English national identity stirred the conversation around the significance and scope of Englishness today and in the future. Literature, in this moment of profound crisis, has become an instrument to interrogate the meaning of national identity. As Kumar argues, English literature has traditionally engaged with the state of the nation, becoming an "implicit sociology" (Kumar 2015, 168). Literature in England has always been a means to investigate and represent the nation and interpret the national character. Considering the question of English national identity as one of the central causes of the Brexit crisis, it becomes essential to study the literary responses, exploring if and how Brexit novels contribute to the representation of Englishness and potentially participate in the search for England.

4.3 Shaping National Imagery through Narration

The role of English literature as national discourse has been widely explored in literary criticism. Krishan Kumar identifies literature's sociological and political function as "the arena in which questions of national identity and the health of the national culture could be, and were, most fiercely debated" (Kumar 2003, 220). Especially from the nineteenth century, with the creation of the English literary canon, literature embodied the "essence of the English nation", acquiring an almost religious function (Kumar 2003, 219-220). In *The Constitution of English Literature: The State, the Nation and the Canon,* Michael Gardiner argues that English literature served as an "informal constitution" for Great Britain in the absence of written laws. The British constitution and English literature have been mutually supporting, arising from the need to bolster British sovereignty (Gardiner 2013, 8). English literature embodied the nation and its achievements, becoming the cultural framework of the Empire itself (and entering a crisis after the Empire's fall). Gardiner maintains the importance of English literature in reinforcing the imperial role of the nation and the resulting presence of nostalgic elements in English literature after the fall of the Empire. Nowadays, English literature must deal with creating a multicultural and postcolonial national discourse, accounting simultaneously for the emergence of "England the place" as a separate national entity (Gardiner 2013, 86).

The importance of English Studies in universities testifies to the institutional role of English literature. At the end of the nineteenth century, English Studies replaced the cultural authority of the Classics in the university system despite being initially considered a second-rate subject suitable only for women. English was established as the academic discipline embodying high culture and the national character, suited to "a mission of national cultivation" and invested with the moral authority to shape imaginaries and determine national qualities (Doyle 2005, 12).[151] The ability of literature to "write the nation" is understandable if we consider the nation as an "imagined community" shaped by its cultural products, which create a sense of shared identity (see Anderson 2006).[152] Book publishing, an early form of capitalist enterprise, spread national images and symbols, contributing to promoting a common national identity (Anderson 2006, 37). Literature is one of the places where a nation is imagined through the narration of specific identifiers, like myths of origin and traditions. Traditions seem to be consistent practices passed down through generations, but they are often created retroactively. These "invented traditions"[153] strengthen the belief that national identity can be transmitted across generations as a vessel for a pre-existing national identity (Crang 1998, 166). The narration of traditions, myths of origin, and symbols of the nation, repeated across time and through different media, becomes the nation itself through acts of "repetitive narration" (see Bhabha 1990). Literary works are privileged means of representing the nation since they focus on the individual and the community, outlining the relation of national affiliation (Alessio 2020, 57). That is why literature plays a crucial role in the exploration and understanding of the state of the nation. By providing a lens through which to read the nation, literature becomes an essential component of national identity and a tool for shaping collective national imagination.

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[151] English Studies were, as well, invested with an imperial mission: "The study of English and the growth of Empire proceeded from a single ideological climate and the development of the one is intrinsically bound up with the development of the other." (Ashcroft et al. 2002, 3).

[152] Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978) introduces the idea that cultural representations create national identities. Developing Said's perspectives, both Anderson in *Imagined Communities* (1983) and Bhabha in his edited collection *Nation and Narration* (1990) emphasized the imagined status of the nation.

[153] As Eric Hobsbawm defines in his seminal work: "'Invented tradition' is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past.". See *The Invention of Tradition*, edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, 1983.

This is particularly true when considering the literary form of the novel. The communities represented in novels are, necessarily, imagined communities, and as much as the imagined community of the nation, they evoke "powerful emotional and imaginative identifications" (Parrinder 2008, 14). Novels are the source of some of the most influential ideas and expressions of Englishness and English national identity. Interestingly, the novel came to prominence in the same historical period as the invention of the nation-state, which led the critic Franco Moretti to describe the novel as "the symbolic form of the nation-state" (Parrinder 2008, 14). The novel developed as a genre along with the emergence of the middle class, shifting the focus from the aristocracy to ordinary people's everyday lives. The novel represents characters in which the readers can recognise themselves. They are plausible, live in a measurable time, move in a defined space, and pass through an environment subjected to the laws of probability that apply to ordinary experience (Mazzoni 2011, pos. 2001).[154] Correspondingly, the readers (especially women) are from a wide range of social classes, reading novels in the space of their domesticity and sharing the intimacy of the protagonists' thoughts (Parrinder 2008, 13). The development of the idea of "national character" has also been connected to the rise of the novel because of the centrality of character development in the genre (Parrinder 2008, 21). Therefore, the novel talks from individual to individual, representing an idea of community in which the single character moves and acts and with which the reader can identify. All these elements contribute to making the novel the perfect medium to develop and spread ideas of the nation, as well as to create and elaborate an invented community that mirrors the national one.

The two subgenres analysed in this thesis exemplify how the novel has been engaging and potentially contributing to the formation of national identity. As illustrated in the previous chapter, Condition of England novels and Brexit novels share several themes that serve the purpose of representing society by depicting the complexities of moments of profound social change. Therefore, understanding how these literary works can provide ideas about the nation through creative representation is crucial. Even if they employ similar themes, the sensibility attached to the concept

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[154] As Guido Mazzoni argues, even if existing in minor forms before, the genre of the novel gains centrality between the end of the XVIII and the beginning of the XIX century. It is in this period that the so-called "nineteenth-century paradigm", which delineates the canonical form of the novel, becomes dominant. The subsequent literary production, to date, stems from the opposition or the adherence to this paradigm. See Mazzoni, *Theory of the Novel*, translated by Zakyia Hanafi, 2017.

of the nation is different in the two subgenres. National sentiments were solid in the Victorian novels, written as they were at the zenith of imperial power. Condition of England novels deal with England's internal social problems and confront the immense changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution. They draw attention to the national divisions and the conditions of a large part of the population, showing what hides behind idyllic representations of England. At the same time, they express an idea of England linked to nostalgia, colonial domination, and traditional institutions, pointing at the possibility of uniting the national divide and bringing together the nation. Being a product of contemporary sensibilities, Brexit novels articulate an ambivalent approach to national identity. On the one hand, they show a desire to break down exclusive and narrow national identities and create more inclusive ones, interrogating the notion of Englishness. On the other hand, Brexit novels still express traditional forms of identification, recovering the same sets of images attached to a conventional notion of national identity.

The difference in the representation of the nation between the two subgenres is also a consequence of the different historical moments in which they emerged. During the Victorian era, the novel gained traction because it was the perfect medium to explore the central tenets of Victorian beliefs. It reflected Victorian sensibility, focusing on the individual and their capacity to overcome personal challenges (Adams 2009, 31). With Condition of England novels, novel writing took an interest in serious social and political matters. Although they contained some melodramatic elements and exploited the marriage plot, Condition of England novels confronted the reality of the contemporary social situation and became a means of sociological investigation. Realistically depicting the abysmal condition of the working class, Condition of England writers suited themselves for a mission of raising the awareness of middle-class readers. Novels criticised the indifference of the political elite and the cruelty of the *laissez-faire* principles, representing the nation as utterly divided. Condition of England novels proposed an alternative and compassionate version of the nation, imagining the possibility of healing the divide and bridging social differences.

The writers' determination to engage in dialogue with the political and social world and directly intervene in the public debate on the condition of the poor demonstrates that, in Victorian England, novelists were at the forefront of analysing and criticising the social problems of nineteenth-century industrial society (Kumar 2015, 183). Disraeli, for instance, used literature as a political tool to influence public

opinion (Schwarz 1974, 2) and criticise the contemporary political establishment, prefiguring the possibility of a better future. Through *Sybil or The Two Nations*, Disraeli expresses his antipathy for the Whigs, which he sees as responsible for the national division. The solution offered is a return to neo-feudalism centred on the Crown, the Church, and the Tory party. In this representation, nostalgia is an essential element (as will be analysed in the subsequent section). Disraeli depicts an idealised past in England, where the mutual respect between the aristocracy and the people prevented violent revolts like the Chartist ones. Therefore, the novel becomes a medium to express political ideas about the nation and propose an alternative version of it, in *Sybil*'s case, based on an invented past. Condition of England novels connect literature and the desire for political reform.

The intent of the Condition of England writers was not only to describe contemporary society and offer a different perspective on social problems but also to try to educate the public about the working and living conditions of the poor in England. In this respect, Dickens was the first to believe that novels were to be considered more than entertainment, arguing for their cultural worth as a genre and their ability to appeal to the entire population. Novels help pursue popular education but also social and cultural cohesion, potentially counterbalancing the fragmentation of contemporary industrialised society (Paroissien 2008, 142-143). Dickens expresses this thought in several essays on popular culture and his only Condition of England novel, *Hard Times*. Mr Sleary's mantra in the novel, "People must be amused", expresses Dickens' idea of the value of public entertainment to educate the people. Dickens strongly believes that the power of imagination can heal the national divide created by industrialisation and the utilitarian educational system (Paroissien 2008, 144). Like any other cultural form of entertainment, the novel must be accessible to everyone to promote a sense of community against the erosion of family values in the industrialised society. At the same time, the novel must also convey moral teaching and educate the readers to develop compassionate feelings. The presence of a moral scope in Dickens' novels is functional to the role of the novel as a means of social cohesion and education.

The pedagogical purpose of the novel is central also in Gaskell's *North and South* as well as in Brontë's *Shirley*. Through the documentary precision of her descriptions and the rich feelings expressed by her characters, Gaskell aimed to familiarise her middle-class readers with the working classes. She uses the medium of

the novel to push her reader to practice philanthropy to the extent that the text itself becomes a philanthropic gesture, representing the ideal woman visitor (Margaret) and claiming the same function for its narrative (Elliott Williams 1994, 25). Moreover, like Margaret's role as a female visitor, Gaskell's social-problem novel asserts middle-class women's authority to participate in public discussions about social and political issues (Elliott Williams 1994, 43). As much as Margaret can mediate between opposite social classes and different social environments, the novel educates and brings awareness to the readers, mediating between reality and fiction. Similarly, in *Shirley*, the ability of Caroline and Shirley to negotiate between different classes offers an image of the nation based on empathy and honest talking.

In all the Condition of England novels analysed, marriage is one of the main ways to realise the envisioned social union. Marriage is a potent metaphor for the nation, and the marriage between contraries entails the possibility of resolving national differences (Parrinder 2008, 32). *Sybil*, *Hard Times*, *North and South*, and *Shirley* revolve around the relationship between different faces of the nation. The final resolution of the conflicts exposes the hope for a renovated sense of national harmony based on personal and familial bonds. The union represented by marriage brings together different ways of intending the national community and other social classes and demands a remapping of England's regional differences. Human relationships prevail over petty divisions, be it of class, ways of life or place of origin, creating a sense of national belonging which unites the various characters. The idea of the nation represented in Condition of England novels looks back at a past of simple social interactions and mutual help. It advocates a return of sympathetic human relationships to contrast the present social conflicts, overcome national divisions, and create a future of national cohesion. Therefore, celebrating and consolidating national unity is central to Victorian Condition of England novels.

In like manner, Brexit novels are the literary response to a time of trouble and profound pondering around the meaning of being English. When nations undergo some form of crisis, state-of-the-nation novels tend to be more numerous, providing a commentary on the times (Cartwright 2011). Brexit novels also aim to promote the image of a possible unified country, broken by internal divisions exacerbated by Brexit. At the same time, the proud and celebratory portrait of the nation of Victorian times is nowadays faltering. The fall of the Empire and the knowledge of the atrocities of colonialism, as well as the advent of globalisation and multiculturalism, changed

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the perspective on national identity, making it more fluid and less clear. The way in which contemporary authors relate to the representation of the nation is complicated by the acknowledgement of the necessity to abandon the traditional, ethnically homogeneous idea of the national community in favour of an open and flexible one. In Brexit novels, the conventional set of images attached to the notion of England is often criticised, satirised, or modified in order to push for a reorientation of English national identity from insular to open-minded. Once again, through narration, the traditional idea of the nation is rejected and rewritten (Alessio 2020, 61). Literature has responded to the emergence of the identity issue at the core of Brexit. The political appropriation of English nationalism has provoked the need to address the question of English national identity in the cultural milieu. The Brexit referendum highlighted the significance of national identity, advertising the need to re-border the nation and recover British (or, more narrowly, English) exceptionalism. Most Brexit novels openly criticise this idea, but they do so by claiming, at the same time, a sense of national union and pride. Brexit novels recover the nationalistic rhetoric promoted in the Brexit campaign,[155] only to deconstruct it and create a dialogue that opens the possibility of transforming its restrictive meanings to adapt to the contemporary, constantly changing society. Novels are central to any ideological change, providing the imagining of a newly progressive, open England (Marr 2000, 231 qtd in Shaw 2021, 99). Brexit novels consider the state of the nation, and they offer a critical reflection on the historical and cultural factors that have contributed to the current situation. Therefore, it is of interest to investigate how these works seek to challenge the prevailing stereotypes and assumptions about Englishness and foster a more inclusive and cosmopolitan vision of the nation's future.

Brexit novels explore the most significant questions regarding English identity. The nostalgia for a past of independence and dignity is central to Melissa Harrison's *All Among the Barley*. The story demonstrates how nativist calls for a return to an imagined England of rural traditions, familial bonds, and ethnic exclusion are the fuel of violence. In the novel, the condemnation of a certain kind of nativism pairs with a deep love and celebration for the natural environment of the English countryside, which is described not in terms of a perfect idyll but of a vibrant and often cruel

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[155] The Brexit rhetoric was often grounded on the representation of quintessential Englishness, the idealisation of the English countryside, and the reference to specific historical periods. Brexit novels interact with these sets of images. This theme is analysed in subsequent sections.

environment. The idealisation of a past of dominance and supposed ethnic purity is also the main theme of Sarah Moss' *Ghost Wall*. The mythical idea of a primitive Britannia that could stand against the Roman Empire connects to the exceptional status of contemporary Great Britain against the European Union. The direct consequence of nostalgic discourses of domination is, again, violence and abuse. The novel offers a counter-narrative to this exclusionary and abusive narration of the nation through the victim's perspective, which embraces both the respect for the country's history and the refusal to practice control. The deconstruction and re-construction of English identity through narration also depend on the employment and remodelling of the symbols of quintessential Englishness. Novels like Jonathan Coe's *Middle England* and Amanda Craig's *The Lie of the Land* reinterpret, in different ways, the traditional representation of England. Depicting the central moment of the Olympic Opening Ceremony, Coe portrays how crystalised images of England's heritage resonate in various characters, creating a moment of perceived national identification. The representation of the English countryside in *The Lie of the Land* recovers stereotyped imaginaries linked to English rural identity. Craig's novel reinforces the idea that the countryside is a space of peace while at the same time framing its darkest characteristics.

A comprehensive reading of Brexit novels demonstrates how they aim to mould the idea of the nation. Recovering the nostalgic and exclusionary rhetoric central to the Brexit debate and showing a different perspective on national identity, Brexit novels reshape the idea of Englishness, promoting a more open and progressive image of the national community. Literature has always been a significant influence in determining the identifiers of Englishness in the popular cultural imagination (Eaglestone 2018, 18). As the literary text is a fundamental element of the national imaginary, a way of thinking about the world, novels can potentially contribute to political outcomes (Eaglestone 2018, 45). Through literary representation, authors of both subgenres propose a counter-narrative to existing social discourses, trying, as well, to present solutions to social problems. Their answer to the contemporary political and social climate is a return to the centrality of personal relationships and a sense of community unsullied by the logic of profit. The novel serves as a mirror to reflect and think about the nation and to imagine a better future in which solidarity takes the place of individualism. The centrality of literary texts, especially the novel, in constructing and deconstructing the nation is key to understanding the emergence of a subgenre like the Brexit novel.

4.4 The Past is an Idyllic Country: Narrating Nostalgia

The idealisation of the English past was central in the Brexit rhetoric, offering comfort to social anxieties about the future (O'Toole 2018, 180). Instead of confronting the contemporary social changes, many voters chose to resort to a romanticised version of an untainted English past, which could be controlled and modified. Multiculturalism, globalisation, and economic and cultural crises were substituted by the idea of a mythical homogenous past (Browning 2019, 232). In other words, the solution proposed by Brexiteers was to look back to those times when an English identity (supposedly) existed in its purest form and try to recover it. In particular, the nostalgic rhetoric exploited in the Brexit campaign focused on three points of reference: the Empire, the Second World War, and the Anglo-Saxon tradition. In the political narrative, these three focal moments in English history symbolised the past strength and sovereignty of Great Britain and the resistance to the invasion from Europe, identified as the enemy. The Brexiteers compared the presumed loss of control over borders and perceived diminished power in favour of a European super-state with an invented history of independence and political supremacy. The main slogan of the Leave campaign, "Take back control!" promoted a sense of loss and the need to bring back the past.

The Empire was rehabilitated as a good thing, a symbol of power, completely obliterating the colonial domination and the oppression of millions of people it represented. The Leave campaign painted the image of a glorious imperial past in order to inspire a sense of pride in the imperial mission. It pointed to a galvanising future for Great Britain outside the EU and a return to a privileged relationship with the Commonwealth and the Anglosphere, especially the USA (see Wellings 2019). While proposing the return to an Empire 2.0, Brexiteers were also configuring the exit from the EU as a national liberation movement, thus conceiving themselves as the victims of "imperial" oppression (O'Toole 2018, 80). The rhetorical passage from coloniser to colonised served to imagine Great Britain as the object of international injustice and Brexit as a moment of national unity and defiance of the far and autocratic European Union. The positioning of Great Britain as the victim of European domination was linked to powerful memories of WWII, epitomising in the Brexiteer rhetoric the ultimate act of resistance against the European invader. The vision of the last world

conflict as a moment of heroism and endurance was promoted not only by Leave politicians and journals but also through movies and books.[156] In the British mind, the Second World War represented the "darkest" and "finest" hours in which the country stood alone against Nazism. Winston Churchill became a symbol of Britain's heroism, ignoring his support for a united Europe, and the spirit of Dunkirk and the Blitz were central in configuring Europe as the enemy (Kissane 2018). The Second World War incarnates the last moment Great Britain was powerful and, most importantly, courageously united against a common adversary. After the end of the conflict, from which Great Britain was supposed to come out as a winner, the country had to confront the fall of the Empire and the subsequent diminished role in the world political arena. The entry into the European Union followed suit and was forever linked to feelings of defeat, exhaustion, and weakness. For this reason, the memory of World War II evokes intense feelings of national attachment, especially in times of crisis (Koegler, Kumar Malreddy et al. 2020, 586). Significantly, the war also strengthened national unity and camaraderie across classes and different UK nationalities, thus becoming a signifier of a rooted national identity (Eaglestone 2018, 97). This spirit is now remembered with nostalgia at a moment when the unity of Great Britain is frail.

The celebration of the English character in the endurance and defeat of the continental aggressor during the Blitz was attached, in the Brexiteers' rhetoric, to a much more ancient assault from Europe. Memories of imperial power and war heroism were fused (and confused) with the revival of Anglo-Saxon Britain. The 11th-century Norman conquest and the Battle of Hastings are considered a threshold in English history. Brexiteers, such as Boris Johnson, Nigel Farage and Jacob Rees-Mogg, often referred to 1066 (the Battle of Hastings) as the last time a foreign ruler conquered Great Britain (Stratton 2019, 13). The Norman conquest is believed to be the end of an independent Britain and consequently compared to the entrance into the EU. The nostalgic rhetoric idealises Anglo-Saxon Britain as an equal and free society, which was destroyed and oppressed by the continental invader. Pre-Norman society is described as a mythical, ethnically, and culturally homogenous English community (Stratton 2019, 13). Henrietta Marshall's *Our Island History* (1905) is a central text in shaping these historical myths. The book romanticises the heroic deeds of Harold,

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[156] Two films about Winston Churchill and one about Dunkirk were released in 2017, indicating the public's interest in learning more about that historical period (see Stratton 2019).

whom she calls "the last king of England", imbuing with an Anglocentric perspective the British narration of the past. The republishing of *Our Island History* in 2005 suggests the contemporary fascination with Anglo-Saxon history and the appeal (supported by various politicians)[157] in promulgating a mystified version of history, which places at the centre the opposition of the "island country", identified as England, and the European continent.

The recovery and celebration of these events have been a central rhetorical tool in the Brexit discourse. The nostalgic celebration of Englishness becomes prominent at times of conflict (an example is the literary production of the Second World War) (Burden and Kohl 2006). The idealisation of a past of independence, strength, and national unity appealed to a vast part of the population. The idea of a lost monolithic English national identity that excluded whoever was foreign stimulated calls for closed borders policies. The Leave side recalled these representations of the past to configure Great Britain (or, more specifically, England) as naturally and perpetually in opposition to the European Other. Instead of promoting a future of integration, nostalgic national discourses fed into parochial and exclusive forms of identity built on invented traditions. These crystallised images have been evoked in the political discourse and in the cultural one, such as in films, TV productions, books, and national events, which reproduce the exact version of the English past proposed by conservative political discourses. These performances have become an integral part of English cultural identity, so much so that it is common to associate the idea of England with nostalgic imaginaries, often linked to stereotypical representations borrowed from movies or novels. To the same extent, novels can deconstruct the idealised images of England's past. When history becomes an invented tradition, novels potentially engage with a more truthful version of history. They can challenge the dominant narrative and offer alternative perspectives that highlight the complexities and contradictions of the past. In the Brexit moment, novels have emerged as a powerful medium to criticise the nostalgic rhetoric employed during the Brexit campaign. These novels seek to restore a different image of England's past, one that is not based on romanticised notions of a bygone era but on a more realistic and multifaceted understanding of the country's complex historical legacy.

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[157] The book was cited by both David Cameron and Michael Gove as having a central role in British education.

For example, in the last book of Smith's quartet, *Summer*, the author exposes the galvanising rhetoric about Britain's heroism during WWII. The story of Daniel, who, during the war, was interned with his father in a prison camp for German citizens on the Isle of Man, offers a different perspective on the war period. While politicians and newspapers evoke the heroic deeds of the British in the last world conflict, the novel uncovers an often-forgotten episode. The people imprisoned in the Hutchinson camp were Jews and German citizens who ran away from the Nazi regime:

> We're the ones who thought we'd got away from the Nazis, the man next to Daniel said. We're doctors, teachers, chemists, shopkeepers, labourers, factory workers, you name it. What we're not is Nazis.
> Told us nothing, the soldier said. 'Enemy aliens' is what they said. Are you not the Germans, then?
> The Germans are not all Nazis, the man said. (Smith 2020, 88)

Like the many men imprisoned in the camp, Daniel and his father have the only fault of having a German passport. In the novel, Daniel's memories mirror the story of Hero, a Vietnamese prisoner in an IRC, symbolically connecting the injustice of wartime confinement to the refugee centres of the present time. Daniel and Hero endure detention, even if they are innocent: "How ironic it is that someone called Hero is imprisoned, and at the same time that the person called Hero is truly heroic in the way he deals with being imprisoned though he's innocent." (Smith 2020, 65). The name Hero prompts a reflection on the real meaning of heroism nowadays. The young Sacha comments: "I have a vision that the modern sense of being a hero is like shining a bright light on things that need to be seen. I guess that if someone does this, it brings its own consequences." (Smith 2020, 140). Smith aims to criticise the nostalgia touted by the Brexiteers through the innocent voice of the girl and the honest response of Hero, "I am not a hero! I am not a masterpiece! But I am a brother." (Smith 2020, 206). The author deconstructs the rhetorical exploitation of historical heroism, pointing at the need for more authentic and relatable heroes. The "modern sense of being a hero" is being a brother, practising solidarity, and helping others in need.

Ali Smith represents the dramatic stories of Daniel and Hero to condemn the misleading political discourse and push for an empathetic identification with the characters. Sam Byers in *Perfidious Albion*, instead, attacks the nostalgic rhetoric of

the Leave side with explicit satirical intents through the voice of the populist politician Hugo Bennington:

> When he talked of present-day England and the ways in which it both disappointed and terrified him, he made clear he was regarding it in contrast to another, historical England, which had once made him proud and secure. […] Through simplification, Hugo was selling reassurance. Through nostalgia, he was selling the political equivalent of escapism. And through reductive blame-mongering, he was, he knew, selling a potent combination of the two. (Byers 2018, 85)

Through the omniscient narrator, the reader accesses Hugo's reflections. Hugo makes clear that his intentions are pure propaganda. Even if he believes contemporary England is a ruined country which should look back to find its way, he is also aware that what he is doing is "selling". His rhetoric aims to create an artificial idea of England to convince his voters that England Always,[158] the fictional party that recalls UKIP, is what they need. He knows, "'People don't want change', said Hugo 'They want the status quo. They want to vote for people who promise to protect them against change'" (Byers 2018, 245). Again, Hugo alludes to people voting for fundamentally empty promises. The dishonesty of Bennington's politics is evident in the novel, and it directly functions as a criticism against the rhetoric employed by Brexiteers, which pretended to put "the needs of our country and the people in it first" (Byers 2018, 195), only to achieve their political interests. Similarly, Hugo lists the values to which England should return: "Integrity. Pride in our landscape, our people. Control over our borders, our laws." (Byers 2018, 195). These values are the same ones campaigned by the Leave parties. The country should celebrate the English landscape and people, the physical representations of the national character. Central to this discourse is a nostalgic element. In Hugo's case, he promotes the nostalgia for a lost England that once made him feel proud and safe, a nation at the command of the biggest empire on earth. This "post-imperial melancholia" (Gilroy 2004) is both a yearning for reassurance and a refusal of the current reality (Alessio 2020, 176). "[The] nation

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[158] England Always is modelled on UKIP, but its name refers to England, not Britain. The author mystifies the false title of the United Kingdom Independence Party, behind which the English nationalist party hides.

England ultimately become" (Byers 2018, 241) is full of foreigners, queers, and feminists: a place that, in Hugo's mind, deserves to be erased to return to the mythical country of nostalgic narratives.

All these discourses about the English past appeal to a sense of loss and confusion felt by many citizens who struggle to recognise themselves in a fast-paced, multicultural, and globalised Britain. The nostalgia for a past considered better than the present and erroneously depicted as safer and culturally monolithic resonates with a part of the population that fears social change. The nostalgic narrative, as commented by Raymond Williams in *The Country and the City* (1973), is an established tendency that can be detected in national literary productions. English literature of every epoch contains a reference to a better past, a "Golden Age" (that was never real) believed to be more innocent and happier than the corrupted present (see *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams, chapter 4). Williams argues that the allusion to an idealised past resurfaces in literature during periods of deep transformations as a social response to change.[159] In Condition of England novels, for instance, the idealisation of the past is used to criticise the present situation of national division and the state of the poorer classes. The past becomes a place where relationships are equal, and the social conditions of the poor are better than in the present: the reference to a Golden Age is an established convention, and it is not problematised as it is in Brexit novels.

In Disraeli's *Sybil or the Two Nations*, the allusion to a better past has a political purpose. The novel is the literary manifesto of the Young England party, and the idealisation of the past is central to their political programme. Disraeli in *Sybil* is not trying to depict a faithful portrait of the past. Instead, he uses historical nostalgia to promote his political ambitions (Rogers 2002, 80). Disraeli's political philosophy encourages the recovery of the role of the aristocracy and the Church, which Egremont and Sybil symbolise in the novel. As already noted, the marriage between the two represents the hope for a future in which the two pillars of society will collaborate to protect the poor. This political idea depends on the myth that, in the past, there was a more benevolent social system, which the cash nexus in contemporary industrial

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[159] "And then what seems an old order, a 'traditional' society, keeps appearing, reappearing, at bewilderingly various dates: in practice as an idea, to some extent based in experience, against which contemporary change can be measured. The structure of feeling within which this backward reference is to be understood is then not primarily a matter of historical explanation and analysis. What is really significant is this particular kind of reaction to the fact of change, and this has more real and more interesting social causes." (Williams 1973, 35).

society has eroded. The disintegration of the paternalistic feudal system has caused the division of society into the "two nations" of the novel, the rich and the poor. According to Disraeli, in the past, the good lords protected their peasants, the peasants cultivated the land, and the Church provided for the destitute. In Disraeli's times, the lords were impoverished and disregarded their farmers; the factory owners exploited their workers, and the Church was degraded and useless (Rogers 2002, 84). This idealised version of the past is essential to set an example for the present generation of politicians.

Therefore, *Sybil* reverberates with nostalgia and a desire to resurrect old systems (Rogers 2002, 82-83). The first meeting between Sybil and Egremont is set, not casually, among the ruins of an ancient monastery. There, the young man entertains an interesting dialogue with two strangers (later revealed to be Gerard and Morley). The encounter corresponds with the start of Egremont's social and political education. The two strangers complain about the lost monasteries:

> 'All agree the Monastics were easy landlords; their rents were low; they granted leases in those days. Their tenants too might renew their term before their tenure ran out: so they were men of spirit and property. There were yeomen then, sir: the country was not divided into two classes, masters and slaves; there was some resting-place between luxury and misery. Comfort was an English habit then, not merely an English word.' (Disraeli 1845, 74-75)

Gerard, who is Catholic, comments on the fairer treatment the Monastics reserved to their tenants, compared to the present-day landlords, who are indifferent to the poor's extreme poverty and deprivation. Moreover, he deems the landlords responsible for dividing the country into two conflicting classes because they are only interested in profit and not in their people's comfort. To the present atomised society, which only cares for profits, Morley compares the importance of community, which was central in the past:

> 'As for community,' said a voice which proceeded neither from Egremont nor the stranger, 'with the monasteries expired the only type that we ever had in England of such an intercourse. There is no community in England; there is

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aggregation, but aggregation under circumstances which make it rather a dissociating, than a uniting, principle.' (Disraeli 1845, 77)

Morley laments the disappearance of monasteries, a form of local government that ensured people's welfare and safety. In the present, the mutual help and solidarity that was a habit in the past have disappeared, leaving space for a "dissociating aggregation" where everyone cares about his own business and not for the whole community.

The decay in the condition of the people connects to another historical event: the Norman conquest. Walter Gerard is a man of Anglo-Saxon descent whose title was stolen by the Earl of Mowbray. He is described as an honest man with typical Anglo-Saxon nobility in his endeavour. In a central scene, he is reading the book *A History of England in the Norman Occupation* with his daughter Sybil. When Egremont asks about the book, Gerard laments the loss of men like Harold II (the last Anglo-Saxon king) and the country's decline after the Norman Conquest.[160] He comments on how the poor were much better off during Anglo-Saxon times:

'I say, for instance, the people were better clothed, better lodged, and better fed just before the war of the Roses than they are at this moment. We know how an English peasant lived in those times: he eat[s] flesh every day, he never drank water, was well housed, and clothed in stout woollens.' (Disraeli 1845, 197)

Gerard idealises the Anglo-Saxon era, arguing that the old Saxon aristocracy cared for the welfare of ordinary people, whereas the contemporary aristocracy, allied with the middle-class industrialists, is indifferent to the plight of the labouring poor: "There is more serfdom in England now than at any time since the Conquest." (Disraeli 1845, 196). The solution, for Disraeli, lies in a rejuvenated aristocracy and active Church, which should look back at the past as an example to ameliorate the present and create a better future.

Mr Trafford and the village of Mowdale set the example. Trafford is the benevolent master whose enlightened management of the mill favours better life

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[160] The conventional rhetoric sees the Normans as the conquerors and the Anglo-Saxons as the conquered. In the novel, these are used as metaphors for the "rich" and the "poor" (Melman 1991, 579). Gerard and his daughter Sybil, the representative of the people, are Anglo-Saxons. Egremont is of Norman descent. The final marriage between the two symbolizes, as well, the overcoming of such divisions.

conditions for the workers. The idyllic description of the clean and tidy village is the ideal image of industrial feudalism that Disraeli wishes to promote. The centrality of the church in the town symbolises the union between good aristocracy and faith. In "Tory-radical" Condition of England novels, such as *Sybil* and *Shirley,* there is an emphasis on a return to an organic community, where the aristocracy is responsible for the less fortunate. Crucial in these novels is the condemnation of the social consequences of industrialisation and urbanisation, connected to values such as individualism and utilitarianism. For authors like Disraeli and Brontë, it was essential to restore an organic society united by reciprocal relationships of paternalism and deference against the mechanistic principles of liberal political economy (Roberts 2020, 38).[161] These ideas were strictly connected to the reinstatement of landed propriety. From the point of view of the aristocracy, this meant a recovery of their power and a refusal of the industrial doctrines. The Chartist movement also called for the return of the working class to the land.[162] The idea that pre-enclosures England was better than the industrial one, and the desire to recover the supposed independence that the fieldwork entailed was central in the Chartist political plans (Elliott 2021, 50). Even if the aristocracy and the working class desired the return to the land for different purposes, there was a shared use of myths idealising the past.

The wish to return to the land relates to the celebration of an image of an idyllic rural England, which no longer exists (and probably never existed). The link between the rural landscape and Englishness is well established:[163] England is the "green and pleasant land". The English countryside, deprived of all the ugliness, is compared to contemporary decay. The Brexit rhetoric appeals to a similar nostalgia for a past of independence and dignity and advocates a return to the pastoral idyll of the "deep England" (a theme that will be analysed in the subsequent section). The "pride in our

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[161] For Charlotte Brontë, the organic community is feasible when there is a personal bond with the place. In *Shirley*, a strongly regional novel, the Yorkshire character is impersonated by the honest and trustworthy country squire, Mr Yorke. Conversely, the characters without organic connections to the place, like the half-foreign Moore, are described negatively as disdainful of their fellow countrymen. Only through marriage with the fully Yorkshire girl, Caroline, will Moore be redeemed, creating a meaningful relationship with the place, thus becoming a benevolent Yorkshire master.

[162] In *Shirley*, Brontë represents the Luddite revolt, which took place in the North of England (Yorkshire, in the novel) in 1811-1813. The Luddite movement was led by textile workers who opposed the use of machinery, often destroying them. In the novel, the Luddites destroy the machine that Gerard Moore imported from Belgium. The Luddites in *Shirley* represent the Chartist movement that was active in Brontë's days.

[163] Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City* is certainly one of the most important investigations about the role played by the politics of place in constructing English national identity.

landscape", advertised by Hugo Bennington in Byers' novel, is an example of the rhetoric that aims to recover the supposed "rural character" of England. This nostalgic view of the past, which calls for a return to traditional ways of life, is represented and criticised in Melissa Harrison's *All Among the Barley*, which describes the dangers hiding in nostalgic discourses.

The novel is set in an English village in 1933. The choice of setting the story in 1933 allows for a comparison between the Brexit moment and the period when fascism spread throughout Europe. The author aims to illustrate how discriminatory and prejudiced ideologies can reach apparently ordinary places (Ferguson 2019). Nothing seems to change in the small village, and the cycle of seasons continues. The sequence of growing and cropping repeats itself every year: "The farm was a world of ancient and immovable rhythms and beliefs." (Harrison 2018, 96). Edith is the protagonist and narrator of the story, an "odd child" (Harrison 2018, 3), the daughter of the farmers of Wych Farm. She spends her days reading, hiding in nature, and occasionally helping her family at the farm. Everything seems to change when Constance FitzAllen arrives in the village looking to make:

> 'A study of country ways: folklore, cottage crafts, dialect words, recipes – that kind of thing. The War – well, that's when everything began to change, don't you agree? And it's such a dreadful shame to see it all being forgotten. So I mean to preserve it – or some of it, at least – for future generations. We simply must celebrate places like this.' (Harrison 2018, 20)

Constance is interested in studying and preserving the traditions of the countryside. Her fascination for the past, like the one professed by Disraeli, aims at illuminating the new generations and "remake[ing] the country entirely, I feel; set it back on the right course.'" (Harrison 2018, 21). She is not simply propagandising a backwards-looking idea of the country; she wants to remake it. Constance's words echo the rhetoric of Brexiteers, whose hopes for a Global Britain were grounded on isolationist economic policies and nostalgic myths of the past (Shaw 2021, 200-201).

Constance demands a return of the people to the land, which she romanticises as an idyllic landscape, deprived of the hardships: "'England, my God!' she said. 'Now, this is what it's all about. It really does nourish the spirit, I find. Mr Williamson believes that 'Only from nature could the truth arise' – and I think he's absolutely

right.'" (Harrison 2018, 201).[164] These concepts are related to a nationalist and exclusionary idea of the country, which should favour the "true English character". When the news spread that a family of Jewish people is living illegally in an empty house, Constance states: "'Well, I'm no anti-Semite, of course. But they're not from here, and if we're not careful they'll mar the character of England forever – not to mention the way they undercut wages and take work away from ordinary people, just as the Irish did'" (Harrison 2018, 199). Her contempt for the foreign Other promotes the fear of a supposed hybridisation of the English genes and a preoccupation with the economic consequences of immigration. To prevent this, Constance calls for a strong government to make Britain independent from the international finance system and favour British manufacturing and farming: "'We must bring down national debt and return to full employment, of course; and we must look to the shires and their ancient traditions, not to the intellectual classes in the cities, for a new sense of national identity and pride. Places like here.'" (Harrison 2018, 139-140). She uses the same rhetoric that Leavers used against EU regulations and the meddling of Westminster in local affairs ("Farming from Whitehall"). As the infamous Michael Gove's phrase, "the people of this country have had enough of experts", she complains about the "intellectual classes in the cities" and she looks at the English countryside as the place from where a new "old" sense of national identity can raise: "Here beats the heart of our nation, hale and lusty: Englishmen and Englishwomen, living in harmony with the land. They may sweat, and they may toil, but there is a purity of purpose to their labours" (Harrison 2018, 163).

In opposition to Constance's idealised image of the countryside, Harrison depicts an honest portrait of it. When Constance interviews Edith's grandfather about the worrisome changes happening around him, he comments: "'Worry me? It don't worry me. We must have change. We must have it! I didn't farm like my father, and George don't farm the same as me. That's the way of it. You can't stand still, not if you want to get on'" (Harrison 2018, 33). He acknowledges the benefits of technology and the impossibility of stopping progress, which is beneficial to the improvement of society. Also, Edith's mother, Ada, is against cooking in the old brick oven, remarking the senselessness of using complicated, old-fashioned methods. Ada is the character

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[164] Constance quotes Henry Williamson, a nature writer who became famous for the novel *Tarka the Otter* (1927). Williamson had fascist sympathies. He joined the British Union of Fascists in 1937 and supported Hitler's ideas.

that functions as a mirror of Constance. She is a typical countryside wife, busy caring for the house and the children, but she conceals bigger aspirations and a rational mind. Trying to prevent Edith from getting married, she pushes her to accept a job proposal to become a teacher. She is the only one who appears empathetic toward the Jewish people who live in the empty house and is the only one not fascinated by Constance and her nostalgic rhetoric: "Mother so rarely spoke of the past, being generally of the opinion that even ill years turned rosy in the mind's eye, and that nostalgia was not something one should trust" (Harrison 2018, 171). Even if she is not as vocal as Constance, Ada refrains from a romanticised vision of life in the countryside. She works hard and must endure the oppressive presence of her husband. That is why she tries to protect Edith from that world she knows can be abusive. Edith's father, instead, falls into the trap of Constance's propaganda. Pushed by economic difficulties, a bad crop, and the feeling of being left behind, he embraces a nationalistic and protectionist idea of England. When Constance makes clear that she intends to create a fascist group, "The Order of English Yeomanry", he joins her in spreading the word in the village: "We must rebuild the country, we must put our own kind first!'" (Harrison 2018, 304).

Edith narrates the story from her point of view. From the beginning, she is described as a special girl who "preferred the company of books to other children, and was frequently chided by my parents after leaving my tasks half-done, distracted by the richer, more vivid world within my head" (Harrison 2018, 3). Her readings are mainly fantasy novels: *The Midnight Folks*, *The Jungle's Book*, and *Lolly Willowes*, which inspire her with an almost pantheistic feeling toward nature. She believes that the trees have thoughts and feelings, and more than once, she finds herself contemplating nature: "Alone, I felt all my confusion ebb and my soul expand – yes, that was it exactly, as though I was part of everything, and everything loved me and reached out to me somehow: our quiet cornfields, the evening sky, the trees" (Harrison 2018, 208).[165] This kind of "magical thinking" is a mechanism that Edith develops to cope with anger and trauma. Her being different and unique made her suffer since she was a child:

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[165] Edith's profound love and respect for nature contrasts with her father's vision of the fields as only functional to men's economic needs. In this sense, the novel incorporates an environmentalist perspective (which is not analysed because it is beyond the focus of the thesis). Harrison intertwines ecocritical topics with the condemnation of a blind nostalgic discourse that aims at recovering a rural dimension of the nation linked to an anthropocentric idea of nature.

I'd pondered what she said about not minding being different, and it had occurred to me that for all my conception of myself as a bookworm I had always really wanted to be like everyone else; in fact at school I would have traded my cleverness in a heart-beat for the chance to have made even one proper friend. (Harrison 2018, 257)

She is angry at her schoolmates, angry at her mother, and angry at a world that she does not understand and in which she has no wish to fit: "Rage: to feel it was like arriving in my body for the first time, entire and intact and beyond argument or doubt." (Harrison 2018, 314). She has no desire to get married and have children but, at the same time, she forces herself to accept the attention of Alf Rose, her brother's friend. When he rapes her, she is unable to admit the violence.[166] However, the trauma causes Edith to have a psychotic episode, and she starts thinking she is a witch. After a fire destroys her family's farm, she believes it is her fault and is finally hospitalised in a mental institute.

Edith is the victim of an abusive patriarchal system, which Constance's nostalgic rhetoric wishes to recover and preserve. The society depicted in the novel is indifferent to the condition of its weakest members. Whoever is considered different is the victim of violence: rape, in the case of Edith, or eviction as the Jewish family. The apparent immutability of the village makes it impossible to escape: "For the fields were eternal, our life the only way of things" (Harrison 2018, 191). Even Ada, who does not want Edith to have her same unhappy life, is not able to find any other solution than to keep her daughter confined at home. As she comments: "'There's no sense in women getting angry, child. It changes nothing, or it changes everything. And neither's any good.'" (Harrison 2018, 253). The tragic finale aims to send precisely the opposite message: change is necessary, "Nothing stands still, and nor should it." (Harrison 2018, 323). In the epilogue, Edith is old; she has spent all her life in the mental institute and recalls what happened immediately before and after the fire. She reflects on how dangerous it is to feel helpless because it makes you the victim of external influence (Harrison 2018, 320) and that thinking about the past as "a lost

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[166] *All Among the Barley* also engages with the topic of trauma. Edith's inability to narrate the violence demonstrates the traumatic nature of the event, which later triggers a dissociating and psychotic episode. In the novel, the concept of trauma is represented through Edith's story and also Ada's repressed pain, demonstrating the intergenerational quality of trauma. See, for reference, Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History*, 1996.

Eden" is wrong: "But at last I came to see that there is a danger in such thinking; for you can never go back, and to make an idol of the past only disfigures the present, and makes the future harder to attain." (Harrison 2018, 324).

Similarly, Sarah Moss in *Ghost Wall* explores the danger of nativist beliefs through the voice of a young girl. The story is set in the 90s', soon after the fall of the Berlin Wall, when the hope for a closer world was at its peak. Silvie and her family join a group of university students and their professor for an experimental archaeology camp. Her father, Bill, is passionate about ancient British history, so much so that he names her daughter Sulevia after an ancient British goddess so that she can have "a proper native British name" (Moss 2018, 18).[167] He is obsessed with symbols of Britain's long-lost ancestry, such as Adrian's wall, "a physical manifestation of Ancient British resistance still marked on the land", a view that makes him proud of his descent, "You could see Dad drawing strength from it" (Moss 2018, 23). To the splendour of this supposed past of independence and strength, he compares the present, which he despises. He loathes foreign people, especially the Irish, and prohibits Silvie from having a passport, a job, or friends. He wants to preserve a supposed British race, connecting it directly to its history:

> Dad didn't like the Irish, tended to see Catholicism in much the same light as the earlier form of Roman imperialism. Foreigners coming over here, telling us what to think. He wanted his own ancestry, wanted a lineage, a claim on something. Not people from Ireland or Rome or Germania or Syria but some tribe sprung from English soil like mushrooms in the night. (Moss 2018, 37)

These nativist ideas recall the same touted by Brexit propaganda. The image of an invasion of Great Britain from Europe or the Middle East references the fear of invasion provoked by the racist and nationalist language used by the Leave campaign. Bill's veneration of ancient Britain as an island nation contradicts "England's blurred margins" and tries to lock Englishness in stasis (Shaw 2021, 202). Moss not only criticises this way of thinking but also shows its dangers. Silvie's father, in fact, is abusive and violent. He hits his wife and Silvie, whipping her with his belt.

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[167] The name Sulevia is actually a corruption of the name of the Latin goddess Sylvia. This demonstrates that Bill holds a mystifying vision of the past, based on personal beliefs and not historical facts.

The re-enactment of the ways of living of primitive British tribes, proposed in the camping that Silvie and her family join, includes foraging and hunting, wearing original clothes and eating what nature provides. When Silvie's father and the Professor find some bogs, they get the idea of recreating an old ritual sacrifice.[168] They build the so-called "ghost wall", a palisade made of skulls to keep enemies and evil spirits away. This idea takes a darker turn when the two men propose to perform a mock ceremony and use Silvie as the designated victim. In the novel, Bill's sadistic and violent desire to bring back an "innocent" British past matches his fascination with the rite of the sacrifice. He wants to preserve the ancient traditions in the same way as the prehistoric sacrificial victims are conserved in the bog: in a continual repetition of the abuse. Bill reassures Silvie that they will not hurt her, but when the ritual starts, the men do not intend to stop:

> I didn't join in this time but stood before them, bound and yet now no longer afraid or ashamed. Here I am then. So kill me.
> They put a fresh flint blade to my hairline. There on her face for the shame of it maybe, I remembered Dad saying. Dad took his hunting knife to my arm, looked me in the face as he pressed down. Here and here, just done for the pain like. I held his gaze. The moon rose, full. They came at me with sticks raised and I lost my balance and fell on the water's edge, was set on my feet again for more. For as long as I could, I watched the infinitesimal progress of the moon along the darkening sky, listened to the calls of the last birds crossing the cool of the evening. There was pain. They had a pile of stones, ready. (Moss 2018, 126)

The ceremony is interrupted by the police, who are warned by the only female student in the university group. The police arrest the men, and Silvie is saved by Molly (the girl student) and Trudi, a local midwife the two girls have previously met. A stark gender division is embedded in the novel. From the beginning, in the re-enactment, the duties are divided between men and women: the men hunt, and the women cook and wash. Moss is sceptical about historical re-enactment, pointing at the romanticised

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[168] Bog is a wetland that can preserve organic material due to its specific characteristics. In Great Britain, in the Iron Age, bogs were used to perpetrate human sacrifices. The designated victims (usually young girls) were tied, tortured, and buried alive in the bogs. The unique conditions of the peats permitted the preservation of these "bog bodies", which were found centuries later in the United Kingdom (see P.V. Glob, *The Bog People: Iron Age Man Preserved*, Faber&Faber, 2011). This ritual inspired several writers, such as the poet Seamus Heaney, who wrote a series of "bog poems" in his collection *North* (1975). The poem "Punishment" represents a scene similar to the prologue of *Ghost Wall*.

way the men in the story seek lost gender hierarchies. In opposition, she presents different female characters who practice ancient skills, honouring historical experience without imitating it (Hagy 2019). The women in the novel not only seem more respectful of the lived traditions of the past (Silvie is much more knowledgeable about the edible plants than the university students), but they also experience solidarity and collaboration. The men, trying to revive ancient habits, also resuscitate patriarchal forms of control and violence. Silvie's father and the Professor talk "about fighting, the way men do when they're really fighting about talking." (Moss 2018, 36), and the two male students immediately get inebriated by the power and brutality of the sacrifice they are perpetuating.

In opposition to this male abusive way of resurrecting the past, the novel's leading voice incarnates a different way of connecting the past with the present. Silvie narrates the story. She is smart and has much knowledge about historical facts. At the same time, she is the victim of her father's abuse, and, in some way, she accepts it and justifies him: "People don't bother to hurt what they don't love. To sacrifice it." (Moss 2018, 108). Hers is the victim's perspective, which enables a connection between different ages. In fact, the novel opens with a scene from the far past: a girl is the victim of a sacrifice in the bog. The same ritual is repeated at the end of the story, and the victim is Silvie. The prehistorical victim's voice echoes throughout the novel, and her presence lingers in the back of Silvie's mind: "She had had a life before that, the bog-girl." (Moss 2018, 58). Until Silvie herself becomes the bog-girl:

> Of course, that was the whole point of the re-enactment, that we ourselves became the ghosts, learning to walk the land as they walked it two thousand years ago, to tend our fire as they tended theirs and hope that some of their thoughts, their way of understanding the world, would follow the dance of muscle and bone. To do it properly, I thought, we would almost have to absent ourselves from ourselves, leaving our actions, our re-enactions, to those no longer there. Who are the ghosts again, us or our dead? Maybe they imagined us first, maybe we were conjured out of the deep past by other minds. (Moss 2018, 29-30)

Like *All Among the Barley*, Moss' novel elaborates on the concept of trauma to describe Silvie's experience, especially the idea of transhistorical trauma. The potential of trauma to transcend time implies that the experience of a traumatic event

by a specific group in the past can have an impact on the psychological state of individuals belonging to the same group in the present (Balaev 2018, 365). In this case, Silvie not only relives the bog-girl's experience in her mind, but she also physically becomes the victim of the same violence.

Ghost Wall provides a warning on how nostalgic misconceptions of British history can lead to the re-emergence of archaic practices, resulting in dangerous abuses of power with consequences for the younger generation (Shaw 2021, 204). As in *All Among the Barley*, the marginal perspective is essential to shed light on the dangers of nostalgic discourses. Edith and Silvie are two young girls who demonstrate deep knowledge and attachment to their land and history. However, they avoid any blind reverence towards the past and any discourse of domination or exclusion.[169] They are curious and want to explore the world and travel. Their perspective exposes the condition of many young people who were ignored in the Brexit debate and had to withstand a decision they did not take. At the same time, Edith and Silvie are somehow isolated from their peers and, because of that, are more likely to be victimised. They both confront the trauma of enduring violence and prevarication. Their voice speaks of the victims of history sacrificed for the sake of tradition and of cultural preservation. Nostalgic discourses can soon become violent actions: "You're not scared, she said. I shrugged. Of what, bones? Of people, she said" (Moss 2018, 104). As Molly suggests, at the end of the novel, it is not the past that should scare us but the people in the present who try to resurrect the past. Silvie's final escape from her destiny demonstrates the possibility of overcoming violent exclusionary discourses through empathy and collaboration.

4.5 "A country at ease with itself": Representations of Quintessential Englishness

The Brexit campaign directed and exploited the re-emergence of English national identity. The fantasy of a Great Britain liberated by the yoke of the European Union was directly taken from traditional representations of England. Once again, British identity served as a cover to promote English nationalism. Even when brandishing the label of the "United Kingdom Independence Party", the Leave parties modelled their

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[169] In his study on nationalism and sexuality, George L. Mosse emphasised how nationalist ideologies worked through codes of masculinity and heterosexual relationships. He argues that "Nationalism adopted [an] ideal of manliness and built its national stereotypes around it." (Mosse 1985: 10, qtd in Featherstone 2009, 24).

slogans on images linked to Englishness more than Britishness. The predominant tone of the campaign evoked Shakespeare's John of Gaunt and his famous nostalgic monologue about England, "this sceptre'd isle". The England represented is always a lost, green Eden, often mistakenly described as an island (Eaglestone 2018, 187). This archetypical representation of England also recalls the satirical quintessential "England England" created by Julian Barnes on the Isle of Wight.[170] Utilising simplified representations of the nation was essential to invest Brexit with a patriotic meaning. England (masked as Great Britain) was invited to celebrate its traditions and the elements that made it exceptional to recover its strength and independence from European domination.

This call to national liberation is rooted in England's glorious past and reinforced by a vision of Englishness through the lens of a romanticised landscape and traditional ways of life (Bartnik 2021, 61). Ian Buruma argues that "Englishness is a romantic, not a political concept" (Buruma 1999, 18). The creation of an idealised notion of Englishness, composed of certain elements, is based on the transmission of specific representations of the country in art, literature and, more recently, mass media (Burden and Kohl 2006, 212-213). Literature has been a fundamental medium for establishing traditional images of England. The repetition through narration created easily recognisable stereotypical descriptions of the country. The "green and pleasant land" of thatched cottages and pubs immediately associated with the English landscape is a trope created through artistic and literary representation (an invented tradition, in the sense given by Eric Hobsbawm). However, different literary examples deconstruct or satirise the stereotypical image of England, particularly in recent years. England's representation is problematised and reinforced in the two subgenres analysed in this thesis. Condition of England novels express nostalgia for a better past and longing for a return to forms of organic communities attached to an idyllic vision of rural England as opposed to present-day industrial development, which has caused poverty for thousands of citizens. The authors of the Condition of England novels propose a solution in which forms of solidarity and conviviality, borrowed from the idealised rural organic community, are applied in the modern industrial scenario. They suggest that this approach could bridge the national divide and unite the nation. Brexit novels

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[170] In his 1998 novel *England, England*, Julian Barnes imagines a highly satirical project to build an England-themed park on the Isle of Wight. The park showcases all the typical symbols of Englishness for the enjoyment of tourists, becoming a quintessential representation of national identity.

convey an ambivalent attitude in the representation of Englishness. They recover and represent traditional Englishness, trying to show how the political elite has exploited stereotypical descriptions of national identity to create a distorted and unattainable portrayal of the nation. At the same time, the same novels use quintessential images of England and end up reinforcing the exact simplified representation rather than denying it.

Condition of England novels are primarily concerned with depicting the state of England. Disraeli's Romantic Toryism idealises the "native" English qualities, such as a green and temperate landscape and a feudal aristocracy and monarchy (Parrinder 2008, 179). The Englishness embedded in the rural imagery contrasts with the conditions in which the working classes live and work in the new industrial settlements. In fact, while longing for a return to an idealised bucolic England, Disraeli expresses disdain for the present situation of despair, which hides behind the conventional rhetoric:

> The situation of the rural town of Marney was one of the most delightful easily to be imagined. In a spreading dale, contiguous to the margin of a clear and lively stream, surrounded by meadows and gardens, and backed by lofty hills, undulating and richly wooded, the traveller on the opposite heights of the dale would often stop to admire the merry prospect, that recalled to him the traditional epithet of his country.
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> Beautiful illusion! For behind that laughing landscape, penury and disease fed upon the vitals of a miserable population! (Disraeli 1845,63)

The description of Marney perfectly fits the characteristics of the rural idyll of the English countryside. However, this apparently "laughing landscape" is just an illusion concealing poverty and misery. The notion of "landscape" initially derived from a genre of painting in which elements of the scenery that were not pleasing were simply ignored (Burden and Kohl 2006, 210). For Disraeli, it is necessary to address the unpleasing elements and try to ameliorate the condition of the poor. It is important to notice that Disraeli's attack on the mystifying representation of the English countryside is essentially a condemnation of the nation's present state and especially of the Whig government. Disraeli also idealises the English past as endowed with all the conventional elements of a pastoral Eden. This idealisation was a typical theme in

literature and art of the period following the Industrial Revolution. The emergence of large, polluted industrial areas was juxtaposed with the revival of the notion of England as a rural dream, gratifying the same upper and middle classes who were profiting from the newly established factories (Burden and Kohl 2006, 213). In *Sybil*, Disraeli laments the loss of this idyllic past and criticises the present situation of misery and inequality. He longs to return to that merry England that is now only an illusion. For the author, this is possible only through the restoration of a strong aristocracy (supporting a Tory government), which ought to take responsibility for the population's welfare and recreate the ideal of an organic community.

The English arcadia also hides a reality of poverty, disenfranchisement, and violence in Amanda Craig's *The Lie of the Land*. Craig draws on the Victorian novel to depict England's wealth gap (Capitani 2021, 506). Her narrative is constructed around a fundamental dichotomy of England's national imaginary: countryside versus city life. Craig's concern with the internal rifts between the rural and the urban is primarily inspired by the Condition of England literary tradition.[171] *The Lie of the Land* incorporates the literary landscapes of the Condition of England novel to propose a social critique, diagnosing urban desolation but also the plight of the rural population (Heidemann 2020, 680). The region of Devon is usually advertised as a happy and tranquil land where people go on holidays and enjoy the natural beauty. The tourism industry exploits the nostalgic rhetoric to build an image of the English countryside as a national heritage, unspoiled by modernity. This contrasts with the reality of the situation as represented in the novel. In Trelorn, the small village where the protagonists move, people live in misery, are employed in the local pie factory for a small salary or survive the hardships of farming.

> Devon looks prosperous, with its houses rising up the rolling hills like flecks of cream rising to the surface, its pastures pocked with cattle and sheep, and its long golden beaches. On days when it's not sheeting with rain from the Atlantic, you can see why it's one of the top tourist destinations in Britain. But you can't live just on tourism, Sally thinks. For Trelorn to stay alive, it has to support real people doing real jobs, like Peter. A music academy won't be half as useful as an agricultural college, and if Tore's housing development helps anybody, it won't

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[171] This topic has been analysed in the previous chapter through the comparison with Gaskell's *North and South*.

be those on the lowest incomes. It's a rich man's fantasy, not real country life like this, Sally thinks. (Craig 2017,196)

As in Disraeli's description of Marney, Trelorn's apparent beauty is an illusion covering poverty and a deep sense of hopelessness. The cause of the impoverishment of these areas is mainly the lack of political interest. Similarly, in *Sybil*, Lord Marney, the landowner, is entirely oblivious to the condition of his tenants. When some cases of "rick burning" happen, Lord Marney is scornful and despises the act of rebellion of his people. In *The Lie of the Land*, the response to the lack of investment and concern for the future of rural regions like Devon is the decision to vote for Leave: "There are three generations of families who've grown up in Trelorn who can't get their kids school places, any more than you can get an appointment with the doctor. You want to know why we want to leave Europe? That's why.'" (Craig 2017, 188). The novel represents the disenfranchisement of the rural population and their consequent disaffection towards the political elites. The idealisation of the English countryside is also undermined by deconstructing some of its most representative symbols. The traditional Devon pies are made in an unhealthy environment. The factory is "built almost entirely on shoddiness" (Craig 2017, 109), and the exploited workers cough and sneeze on the food that is then advertised as a genuine product of the countryside. The cottage, one of the symbols of Englishness, becomes the theatre of a gruesome murder, uncovering the darkest face of the seemingly quiet village.[172]

Even if Craig's novel tries to criticise the stereotypical representation of the English rural idyll, it relies on it. Craig's description of the countryside and its natural beauty still matches the expectation of an untouched arcadia:

Whenever the sun shines in England, it's the most beautiful country in the world, Xan thinks. The landscape is luminous, as if every blade of grass were lit from within. The skies are a deep, lustrous blue, and for miles around, larks evaporate into the skies on a thin sizzle of song. There are foxgloves in tall spires of speckled pink, and bluebells, and daisies as big as moons sprouting so fast you can almost see them grow. The earth and air pulse with energy, the birds seem

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[172] The title of the novel plays on the expression "the lie of the land", which means "the current state of things", referring to the contemporary state of the nation that the novel analyses, but can also hint at the lies hidden behind the apparently placid countryside and what actually lies in the land outside the cottage, that is a severed head.

drunk with joy. Even Home Farm feels different. Light streams in from the new kitchen windows, and all the rooms have been filled with colour. It's strikingly different from their London home. (Craig 2017, 223-224)

England remains "the most beautiful country in the world", with its green and blue sceneries utterly different from London's modern appeal. Also, Devon is where, despite the poverty and the criminal events, it is possible to find the remnants of an organic community. Quentin, who from the beginning despises the countryside and its inhabitants, finds himself irremediably attracted by the local pub, looking for social interaction: "Quentin has always loved pubs, but it's not the beer so much as the atmosphere of the true pub which he likes: the informality, the freedom to talk or be silent, the absence of feminine fripperies and the presence of masculine simplicity." (Craig 2017, 169). The spirit of the pub symbolises the English character: masculine, honest, strong, and independent (and free to talk against any form of political correctness), and it becomes a metaphor for that England promoted by the nativist and nationalist propaganda.[173] The pub in Shipcott where Quentin goes to drink is where he first encounters a local man and becomes his friend (only to discover later that he is a rich rockstar, Gore Tore). The stereotypical idea that people in a small village manage to create amicable relationships with their neighbours is central in the novel. Even if, when Quentin and Lottie arrive, locals are suspicious of them, they soon find a welcoming community, which makes their stay pleasant. Creating human relationships seems easier far from the chaotic London, following the stereotype of the big and heartless metropolis as opposed to the warm conviviality of the countryside: "That's what astonishes her the most: the kindness. In one month, she's had more invitations to drop by for tea than she ever had in eighteen years of motherhood before. Maybe it's true what people say about Londoners being unfriendly, she thinks" (Craig 2017, 55). The result is that Lottie, at the end of the novel, decides to move indefinitely to Trelorn, where she feels at home.

A certain degree of idealisation of rural England remains in the novel. While trying to criticise an unrealistic idea of the countryside as free from pain and darkness, Craig still reinforces a romanticised image of rural communities, recurring to typical

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[173] Nigel Farage advertised himself as "the man in the pub"; he wanted to be recognised as an ordinary man who lived a typical English life and cared about the same things as his fellow citizens despite being one of the wealthiest men in England.

symbols of Englishness (such as the pub) and descriptions of natural beauty. In the final happy ending, the small village, troubled by the discovery of a violent crime, returns to a state of peace and harmony. This finale stems from the same Condition of England tradition, which is the base for the novel's setting. The love story between Quinn and Lottie does not end in the stereotypical marriage but in a divorce. The two decide to continue to live together and to be faithful partners in a compromise that reveals a contemporary sensibility. The ambivalence of this finale recalls the similar ambivalent attitude towards the representation of English national identity. Contemporary authors compromise between the celebration and demolition of a monolithic English identity. Craig is critical of a blind idealisation of the countryside that produces obliviousness to the conditions of the rural communities, but simultaneously, she praises some stereotypical characteristics of the English rural areas. This same compromise emerges in several Brexit novels, such as Jonathan Coe's *Middle England*.

Middle England describes the pervasiveness of crystallised symbols of the nation and how, in the Brexit referendum, a nostalgic and close-minded England prevailed on the multicultural one. The novel is appropriately set in Birmingham, in the Midlands, an ideal location to show the characteristics of a deeply divided nation and offer a more complex portrayal of contemporary Britain (Clément 2021, 3). The title plays on the pun between Middle England and the Midlands, which entwines the concept of "Middle England" itself. "Middle England", in fact, is an expression used to describe middle-class voters who hold conservative values and have a strong attachment to traditional English identity. The idea of "Middle England" is a rhetorical construct which elusively evokes stereotypical conservative English imaginaries, "the country of old maids cycling to Holy Communion, long shadows on cricket grounds, warm beer, invincible green suburbs".[174] As Coe suggests in his novel, these views played a pivotal role in the nation's current state (Clément 2021, 3). The permanence of an idealised Englishness appeals to some voters who feel disoriented by contemporary changes, globalisation, and multiculturalism. These people find refuge in the past, specifically a romanticised and commodified version of past England. In the novel, this is exemplified in the image of the Woodlands Garden Centre: "a

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[174] This is a phrase from the 1993 speech John Major delivered in front of the Conservative Group for Europe. The speech directly quotes part of George Orwell's most famous description of England in *The Lion and the Unicorn* (1941).

kingdom, a mighty empire, whose subjects could roam for hours – for an entire day if they wanted to – through a succession of different purlieus and provinces in which every aspect of human life was represented, catered for and commodified." (Coe 2018, 66). The garden centre is described as an empire, a metaphor for Great Britain, where the English lifestyle is marketed as heritage. The shop sells a traditional and monolithic English identity: English food, English movies, "jigsaw puzzles depicting farmyard scenes from pre-industrial days" (Coe 2018, 66), and books of local history portraying a nostalgic picture of the past, in particular related to the Second World War. Woodlands Garden Centre markets a quintessential Englishness attached to its traditions. Places like the garden centre "mobilise a legitimising but abstract sense of 'pastness' around present social and political events or issues'" (Wright 1985, 147 qtd. in Shaw 2021, 191-192) and endorse nostalgia against a confusing and multicultural present.

In the novel, the 2012 Olympics opening ceremony acquires a similar function, becoming a central moment of national self-representation and occupying a fundamental place in Coe's story. The event, which took place in London, featured the choreographic depiction of Great Britain by the film director Danny Boyle. In a polyhedric way, the event presented the most recognised symbols of Englishness, juxtaposing a globalised Great Britain with an endangered Little England (Shaw 2021, 194). Even when showing elements of the different nations of the United Kingdom, the narration was predominantly Anglocentric. The opening segment of the ceremony displayed an idyllic, pastoral England, a rural paradise of happy farmers and cricket players. This was followed by a celebration of the English industrial past, which is considered an integral part of the English heritage as it expresses the labour culture as a living social tradition (Featherstone 2009, 54). Finally, the show included several references to English pop culture and movies.

Coe narrates the ceremony in a polyphonic chapter, showing all the characters' reactions to the televised programme. Each of them responds differently to the various parts of the ceremony, highlighting generational fractures that will later emerge in the Brexit referendum (Shaw 2021, 195). The oldest and most conservative Helena and Colin enjoy the commemoration of England's past but complain about the choice of using black actors and of mentioning the HMS Windrush in the narration. The liberal Doug and the educated Sophie both approach the event with scepticism, but they end up amazed by the stylistic choices:

> Like Sophie, Doug had approached the opening ceremony in a mood of scepticism. Like her, he watched it with a mounting sense of admiration that was soon bordering on awe. […] And what he felt while watching it were the *stirrings of an emotion he hadn't experienced for years* – had never really experienced at all, perhaps, having grown up in a household where all expressions of patriotism had been considered suspect: *national pride*. (Coe 2018, 140, emphasis added)

For the first time in his life, Doug feels a surge of national pride, an emotion that he and his left-leaning intellectual family had always dismissed. The ceremony becomes a moment of national unity and gratification in which Great Britain's exceptionalism is celebrated, and its most iconic symbols are displayed and honoured.[175] All the characters participate in this collective rite, feeling part of a bigger national community and proud of it.

> The silence of England sinking into a deep, satisfied sleep, the kind of sleep you enjoy after throwing a successful party, when all the guests have gone home and you know that there is no need to get up early in the morning. England felt like a calm and settled place tonight: a country at ease with itself. The thought that so many millions of disparate people had been united, drawn together by a television broadcast, made him think of his childhood again, and made him smile. All was well. And the river seemed to agree with him: the river that was the only thing still to disturb the silence, proceeding on its timeless course, bubbling and rippling tonight, merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily. (Coe 2018, 148)

After the show, England seems "a country at ease with itself", finally able to express its pride and glory. The event makes Benjamin think about his happy and unspoiled childhood, connecting to the nostalgia for an idealised childhood of the nation, an era of patriotic delight.[176] The River Severn, which in the novel is a metaphor for the

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[175] Sports events, in general, are deemed central to fostering patriotic feelings. For reference, see chapter 7 of Featherstone, *Englishness: Twentieth-Century Popular Culture and the Forming of English Identity*, 2009, in which the author identifies football and cricket as the two most celebrated sports as symbols of Englishness.

[176] The comparison between the English (rural) past and childhood is a rhetorical device largely employed in English literature. As Williams argues: "We have seen how often an idea of the country is an idea of childhood: not only the local memories, or the ideally shared communal memory, but the feel of childhood: of delighted absorption in our own world. […] This structure of feeling is powerfully

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country itself,[177] is unusually merry. This is a significant word that recalls the idea of "Merrie England", which again refers to the nostalgia central in the representation of the nation elaborated in the Olympic opening ceremony. The satirical image of an untroubled, contented England "sinking into a deep, satisfied sleep" is evoked by Benjamin, a character that, throughout the novel, is represented as always distracted, wondering nostalgically about his past and often paying no attention to what is going on around him (Alessio 2020, 189). Benjamin's attitude comes to represent the whole nation, lost in the pastoral dreams of a Merrie England depicted in the Olympics ceremony and effectively ignoring the troubles and problems that afflict the country. Coe deconstructs the Olympic ceremony as the representation of an ideal England, unbothered and happy, an imaginative refuge from the idiosyncrasies of contemporaneity, a show that manages to keep all the spectators distracted.

The Olympic event also pushes one of the characters, Sohan, to start reasoning on the meaning of the "Deep England" concept, trying to analyse it and identify its outcomes:

> What was it, exactly? Was it a psychogeographical phenomenon, to do with village greens, the thatched roof of the local pub, the red telephone box and the subtle thwack of cricket ball against willow? Or to understand it fully, did you have to immerse yourself in the writings of Chesterton and Priestley, H. E. Bates and L. T. C. Rolt? Did it help to watch Michael Powell's *A Canterbury Tale*, or Cavalcanti's *Went the Day Well?* Was its musical distillation to be found in the work of Elgar, Vaughan Williams or George Butterworth? The paintings of Constable? Or had it been most powerfully expressed, in fact, in allegorical form by J. R. R. Tolkien when he created the Shire and populated its pastoral idyll with doughty, insular hobbits, prone to somnolence and complacence when left to their own devices but fierce when roused, and quite the best – if the seemingly unlikeliest – people to call upon in a crisis? (Coe 2018, 208)

The notion of Deep England recalls all the national stereotypes, such as the green villages with thatched roofs, cricket and pubs, and the artistic forms of national

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expressed, and we have seen how often it is then converted into illusory ideas of the rural past: those successive and endlessly recessive 'happy Englands of my boyhood'" (Williams 1973, 297).

[177] The Severn, which runs next to Benjamin's house, follows with its murmur the increasing and decreasing of the national tensions, becoming more turbulent as the referendum for Brexit approaches (Shaw 2021, 191).

expression: music, art, and literature. The "Deep Englanders" are compared to the Hobbits, the fantasy race invented by J. R. R. Tolkien in the *Lord of the Rings* books. As much as the creatures of the Shire (also a green and pleasant land), English people are described as insular, busy in their small routines until they find themselves in a crisis. The idea that the English people are "the best people to call upon in a crisis" is based on another cliché attached to the English national identity rooted in the Blitz era's memory (Clément 2021, 6). The Blitz era, when Great Britain stood alone against the Nazi forces, contributed enormously to creating a sense of national union. During World War II, the term Deep England was introduced to refer to an idealised notion of Englishness that romanticised the rural lifestyle of southern England. As a result, the use of the expression is closely linked to this period in British history. The concepts of Middle England and Deep England overlap as both rely on outdated stereotypes and tend to present British identity as a specific version of a Southern English, rural way of life (Clément 2021, 6).

This notion is also presented in Coe's novel when Sophie ironically affirms to have finally found Deep England: "If Deep England existed, she decided, it was here: here on the fifth hole of the Golf and Country Club at Kernel Magna." (Coe 2018, 208). Sophie is accompanying her husband, Ian, to play golf with some older friends. The golf club is immersed in the green and tranquil village, where everything seems to be standing still. The club, frequented exclusively by older people, exposes memorabilia of fox hunting, making Sophie feel like she ended up in the 1950s. Her husband Ian observes: "You may think it's the 1950s, but for some people this is a perfectly normal part of Britain in 2015. Don't knock it just because it's not what you're used to.'" (Coe 2018, 217). Ian's comment points to Sophie's perceived superiority in regard to a more backward lifestyle. For some people, it is perfectly normal to live following a traditional way of life, stuck in an idealised past, recovered, and condensed in simplified symbols of quintessential Englishness. These same people are the ones who feel confused and preoccupied with contemporary social changes and long for a return to monolithic forms of national identity. At the same time, Sophie's snobbish reaction pinpoints the obliviousness of the cultural elite in understanding the issues of a large part of the population, dismissing them as bigots.

Middle England engages with questions of national identity, pondering the meaning of Englishness nowadays. This is attained by representing the characters' various identification with English nationality. The degrees of identification with the

nation that differentiate the characters along generational and cultural lines retrace the same fractures in the imagined national community which emerged with Brexit (Shaw 2021, 195). Moreover, the novel shows the pervasiveness of symbols of Englishness elaborated through different means. Places like the Garden Centre and important sport and mediatic events like the Olympic opening ceremony propose the same identifiers of the nation that are eradicated in a traditional and simplified vision of Englishness. This version of England is the same that was recalled through nostalgic rhetoric in the Brexit campaign. The author looks for the reasons for the effectiveness of this rhetoric and finds it in the continued exposure to Anglocentric representations of the nation. Coe's choice to set the novel during a long period (from 2010 to 2018), engaging with a wide range of characters, uncovers how the present state of the nation has several long-standing causes, including an ongoing discourse around national identity. The national divisions and the identification of a large part of the population with an exclusive and backwards-looking English identity are at the roots of events like Brexit, which exacerbated the fractures already existent in the national community.

The literary representation of a variegated nation is essential to show the different perspectives, creating a multilayered portrait of the country. At the end of the novel, through the resolution of the conflict between Sophie and her husband and Benjamin's final decision to emigrate to France and open a writing school, Coe shows two distinct forms of resistance against the advancing of a monocultural and backwards-looking national identity. The reunion of Sophie and Ian, which encompasses their opposite views on Brexit and gives life to "their beautiful Brexit baby" (Coe 2018, 416), demonstrates how personal relationships and familial feelings can overcome petty political divisions. Benjamin's choice to live in France, where he sets up a small cosmopolitan community, may appear as an abandonment of the British sinking ship. Still, it is also what allows him to create an exemplary form of international collaboration:

> '*Exactly*,' said Benjamin, striking the table for emphasis. 'That's exactly what I'm trying to say. What could be more inspiring, what could be a more powerful … metaphor … for the spirit of cooperation – international cooperation – which prevails, which *has* prevailed – which *ought* to prevail, if … if we, as a nation, hadn't made this … regrettable, but understandable – in *some* ways understandable …' (Coe 2018, 411, emphasis in original)

The multicultural group that reunited at Benjamin's table becomes a metaphor for the possibility of a different future for the nation. The spirit of cooperation and solidarity must overcome the present national divisions. This ending also serves the purpose of engaging with the question of the role of intellectuals in a political crisis. Benjamin wonders if, after writing an autobiographical novel, he should start writing a political book:

> A conversation about what a writer should or shouldn't be doing at a time like this, whether writers should attempt to be *engagés*, as I believe the French expression is, or whether it's best for them to be 'inner emigrants', retreating inside themselves as an escape from reality, but not just an escape, also a means of responding to it, creating an alternative reality, something solid, something consoling, […] this time I decided not to take it lying down, so I said that actually I didn't want my next book to be like the last one, completely personal and autobiographical, I wanted to write something broader, something about the state this country has got itself into in the last few years. (Coe 2018, 334)

The decision to move to France and, at the same time, start writing a new novel, "a meaningful contribution" to society (Coe 2018, 335), configures Coe's hoped responsibilities for writers at the time of Brexit. The idea that writers can create a space to retreat and respond to the present crisis is fundamental. The possibility of conceiving an "alternative reality, something solid, something consoling" expresses the centrality of narration as a means to heal national wounds and imagine a more inclusive society.

The Lie of the Land and *Middle England* resume the literary tradition of Condition of England novels as they "map new sites of marginalisation and precarity" in the post-Brexit era (Heidemann 2020, 676). In this respect, they are just two examples in the subgenre of the Brexit novel, which traces national divisions in contemporary Britain and expresses the necessity of creating new modes of identification. All the themes confronted in the final two chapters of this thesis position Brexit novels as a literary subgenre that aims at producing an alternative national discourse. Through narrative representation, novels written in the years following Brexit engage in a dialogue with political and social commentaries to investigate the

causes and consequences of the Brexit event and propose a response to the questions posed by the contemporary social and political crisis. In this perspective, they follow the long-established literary tradition of the State of the Nation novel. The engagement of literature in commenting society articulates a national discourse that analyses political reasons and social phenomena but, most importantly, relates to individuals and their movement in society. The "Conclusion" of the thesis will further elaborate on these aspects, as well as on the relation of Brexit novels to the tradition of the Condition of England novel, by collecting the outcomes of the previous analysis and connecting them to the initial research hypothesis.

CONCLUSION

> There's ways to survive these times,
> and I think one way is the shape the telling takes.
> (Smith 2019, 21)

This thesis set as its goal to investigate the newly emerged subgenre of the Brexit novel, identifying its formal characteristics, its main themes, and its pragmatic functions. Since 2016, many novels have been published in the UK that more or less overtly focus on the Brexit moment, garnering attention from literary critics and intellectuals who proposed an early formalisation for this newly-formed subgenre. This dissertation aims to contribute to the ongoing debate on this topic and is premised upon the critical hypothesis that the subgenre of the Brexit novel might be situated within the wider literary tradition of the State of the Nation novel, whose first emergence occurred during the Victorian era. Consequentially, some of these novels have been studied by comparing them with the most representative specimen of Condition of England novels.

The investigation of the historical, ideological, stylistic, and thematic similarities between Condition of England novels and Brexit novels appears to confirm the preliminary hypothesis. The ample and systematic connections between them that resulted from the analysis indicate that Brexit novels can be considered, in many aspects, as an updated and renovated form of the Victorian Condition of England novel. Three main elements substantiate the idea of a structural connection between them. First, they both emerge from similar historical moments of deep social change and national crisis, engage in dialogue with the social and political discourses of their time, and offer a different perspective on social relations, advocating for a more sympathetic form of national belonging. Second, albeit in different terms, Condition of England novels and Brexit novels adopt mimetic realism as a way of contrasting political rhetoric. Finally, the two subgenres share several themes that become relevant in response to the prevalent political climate. This conclusive chapter recaps the central

points of the argument and then focuses on the most promising outcomes of the thesis, pinpointing possible future research paths.

To test the initial critical hypothesis, the thesis provided an overview of the selected subgenres. The first two chapters considered Condition of England novels and Brexit novels separately, focusing on the analysis of the historical and political background from which they developed, their main themes, and stylistic features. This section offered a comprehensive analysis of the literary elements typifying the subgenres, highlighting some common features. The study of the historical background shed light on deep resemblances between the early Victorian age and the years before the Brexit referendum in terms of fast social changes, economic crises, widespread discontent, political disbelief, and poverty. The analysis of the historical circumstances that favoured the emergence of Condition of England novels and Brexit novels provided the context for their comparison. The early Victorian age and the present historical moment witnessed deep social changes, which caused a re-evaluation of social values. This contributed to a perceived sense of crisis, which embraced all sectors of public life, eliciting interrogations regarding national identity. In these moments of crisis, literature played a vital role in shaping public discourse and proposing solutions to some of the most pressing social issues.

Framing the social context has been crucial for comprehending the function of the Condition of England and the Brexit novel. The interest in fuelling the debate on the most urgent social problems links the two subgenres at a structural level. The Condition of England novel engaged with the rapid changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution, considering the harms caused by the industrial society and by the emergence of Utilitarian ideologies. These novels represented the condition of the poor in England, which had been worsened by the spreading of industrialism and the government's social policies, which were heavily influenced by the Utilitarian doctrine. The poor reacted to the injustices with the formation of the Chartist movement and widespread protests. Instead, Condition of England writers aimed to solve the social conflict, promoting dialogue between the classes. The novelists were critical of the violence of Chartism, but they also condemned the heartlessness of the upper classes. The solution proposed in Condition of England novels entailed a reorientation of class relationships. The writers envisaged a possible collaboration between the rich and poor through sympathy, compassion, and honest communication. This sentimental solution stressed the individual's agency in reaching the other side of

the national divide and creating meaningful relationships, avoiding the need for radical social transformations. Condition of England novels "provide[d] a sense that one was bridging, if only temporarily, the chasm of class division" (Flint 1987, 8). The novelists' purpose was to heal the national divisions and advocate for a more compassionate society. This could be achieved by educating the upper classes on the plight of the working class and stressing the importance of philanthropy and human relationships.

The study of Brexit novels carried out in this thesis has revealed a similar rationale. During the tumultuous period of Brexit, many writers turned to novels as a means of exploring and making sense of the ongoing social and political upheaval. Through narration, they attempted to comprehend the complex web of issues that Brexit revealed, from questions of identity and belonging to concerns about economic stability and national divisions. Brexit novelists express their need to understand a period of profound social and political confusion, contributing to the public debate. Their works seek to represent how Brexit impacted people's lives and offer possible solutions for the current national crisis. Interestingly, the exploration of Brexit novels has shown how literary responses to the present moment of bewilderment turn to the same sentimental solution proposed in Condition of England novels. Brexit novels identify national divisions and propose a different perspective on them, thus supplying an alternative discourse to the prevalent political one. In this way, they imagine a more inclusive and multifaceted national identity "as a form of resistance" to the atomisation of contemporary British society (Eaglestone 2018, 27-28). In Brexit novels, personal and familial relationships are key to envisaging a harmonious national community united by feelings of sympathy and mutual respect. The possibility of building empathetic individual relations is the first step in shaping a more welcoming nation. The similarity of intents has further validated the connection between Brexit and Condition of England novels.

The initial hypothesis seemed to vacillate when the research engaged with the stylistic features of the two subgenres through a comparative approach. However, a formal analysis of both groups of novels revealed significant underlying similarities. Condition of England novels employed realism to oppose the political rhetoric of the time, provide detailed surveys of the living and working conditions of the poor and shock middle-class readers. Through an appalling portrayal of the most destitute strata of society, novelists wanted to bring awareness to the upper classes and foster

sympathy towards the poor. This was achieved through a combination of documentary precision and melodrama. The melodramatic features were implemented as a reaction to the highly mechanistic and rational doctrine of Utilitarianism that informed the official reports about the condition of the poor. Writers described the working class's condition with accuracy but also with compassion, encouraging an empathetic identification with the poor through sentimentality.

In similar terms, Brexit novels have recovered realism, engaging with specific events and real-life characters and accurately depicting the contemporary social and political landscape. Despite the variety of genres, Brexit novels usually retain a linear plot and a realistic style to portray the present national crisis. Writers criticise the distorted media and political rhetoric and engage with a more honest representation of the contemporary situation. Considering the rise of post-truth politics, which played a crucial role in the Brexit campaign, realism has emerged as a powerful tool for countering misleading claims and disinformation spread by some politicians. Moreover, like in Condition of England novels, the detailed portrayal of relatable characters encourages a sentimental connection with the readers. The use of realism in both subgenres serves a dual ideological purpose, opposing the prevalent political rhetoric and fostering sympathy. The similarity between the two subgenres in the employment of realism provided further evidence for associating Brexit novels with Condition of England novels.

Finally, Condition of England novels present some recurrent and significant themes that resurface in Brexit novels. Through a close reading of the selected corpus, the second part of the thesis identified common themes in the two subgenres. One of the key themes is the portrayal of the nation as divided along class, geographical, and ideological lines. The motif of the national divide is recurring in both subgenres and is often used to highlight the social and political issues of the time. Another pivotal theme in Condition of England novels and Brexit novels is the representation of the working class. This is achieved through the depiction of working-class characters to promote identification with this stigmatised class, even if, in both subgenres, the description of the poor often comes from a privileged or patronising perspective. Female characters also play a crucial role in both subgenres, serving as mediators between different social groups and acting as a bridge between various ideological perspectives. The topic of immigration is another relevant theme that is explored in these novels. However, migrant characters often occupy marginal positions, as they

are silenced and demeaned by other characters. Lastly, both subgenres engage with the issue of nostalgia and the idealisation of the past. This is done through a critical assessment of the nostalgic discourse and the ways in which it is used to legitimise political agendas. The textual analysis of the novels has drawn attention to the ways in which Victorian and contemporary novelists consider these topics. Moreover, the exploration of these themes shed light on the unresolved issue of English national identity. The discussion about Englishness, which proved fundamental in the cultural discourse, is recovered and investigated in both subgenres. Condition of England novels engaged with the social and political issues of a troubled time, pointing at the ethical and political obligation to unite the nation and create a more cohesive community. In the early Victorian era, feelings about the nation reflected a growing sense of identity, so it follows that the cultural production of the time, novels included, exhibited a sincere nationalism. Conversely, the study of Brexit novels revealed an ambivalent approach to the question of national identity. Brexit novelists criticise the nativist discourses at the core of Brexit but also show an attachment to traditional symbols of Englishness, such as the English countryside.

The focus of Brexit novels on English national identity and England prompts a further interrogation – which is suggested but not carried out in the thesis – on the apparent change of direction in the field of English literature. After the fall of the Empire, the discipline of English literature expanded to embrace the so-called postcolonial literatures. Literary works from former colonies claimed their right to "write back", "asserting their difference from the imperial centre." (Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Tiffin 2002, 4). Most postcolonial literature is written in English, in an act of re-appropriation of the dominant language that aims to uncover the reality of the condition of the colonised subject (Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Tiffin 2002, 203). This means that the use of English enabled the voices of postcolonial writers to be incorporated into the label of English literature, entering the canon they wished to subvert. Nowadays, the discipline of English Studies includes all the "literature in English", arriving to comprise a large part of the world. This expansion of English literature has been in progress for decades and has contributed to shaping a new perception of Englishness. As Parrinder maintains: "The history of the English novel reveals both a changing sense of what it is to be English and a gathering awareness of the weight of fictional tradition, whether as a source of veneration or an object to be parodied." (Parrinder 2008, 29). English literature has always been charged with a

national role, informing the way in which English national identity is imagined. This "sense of what it is to be English" can be rejected or reinforced through narration. Postcolonial literature changed the meaning of being English (often appropriating the broader label of British).

Consequently, it is interesting to notice how Brexit novels proceed in a seemingly opposite direction, recovering a sense of identity linked to a narrower concept of Englishness. This thesis has argued that Brexit novels are primarily concerned with the restricted horizon of England. Kristian Shaw, the first scholar to have drawn attention to this topic, holds that "the first wave of post-Brexit fiction largely seems to be detailing the specific frailties and parochial trivialities of an insular and diminished small island." (Eaglestone 2018, 27-28). Even if there are some notable examples of Brexit novels written from a postcolonial perspective – Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017), for instance – most of them are written by English writers, are set in England, and focus on the identity crisis that affects English people. The rediscovered need to engage with a situated national discourse reclaims attention to "England the place". However, this return to an Anglocentric perspective also seems to refuse the nativistic and ethnocentric beliefs touted in the Brexit campaign and to accept a more inclusive vision of Englishness. Brexit novels spotlight England and its deep-seated identity issues, proposing, as a remedy, a less monolithic, more nuanced sense of English national identity. Considering the argument presented in this thesis, it is reasonable to suggest that such an idea has significant potential and merits further investigation.

The engagement of these novels with the contested question of English national identity also raises major issues about the involvement of literature in the national discourse. Through narration, Condition of England novelists managed to enhance awareness about the condition of the poor in England and, consequently, contributed to a push for social reform. Louis Cazamian argues that the Condition of England novel "aims at directly influencing human relations, either in general or with reference to one particular set of circumstances" (Cazamian 1973, 8). Moreover, these novels "also have a representative value," and they reflect "a movement in public opinion" (Cazamian 1973, 9-10). Therefore, the role of the Condition of England novel was to represent and reflect a moment of significant social change but also to direct this change, influencing the public. In this sense, Condition of England novels created a parallel national discourse, showing the reality of class inequalities in England while,

at the same time, imagining an alternative, more united national community. Offering a different perspective, these novels outlined the possibility of more genuine class relations. Condition of England novels played a crucial role in shaping public opinion, countering the Utilitarian political discourse and impelling the need for social change.

If it is accurate to argue that Condition of England novels influenced the social and political outcomes of their age, the impact of Brexit novels on British society is yet to be assessed. The Brexit novel is a developing subgenre that is still gaining recognition. The effects of Brexit novels on the contemporary national discourse are not visible yet. Currently, the study of this subgenre is not comprehensive, but it already hints at some possible outcomes. This dissertation aims to ignite the conversation about the role of Brexit novels within the tradition of the social novel in Britain and about their potential to push for social change. Brexit novels represent the current, unsettled moment, focusing on those thorny social and political issues that were further worsened by the Brexit referendum. Yet the function of these novels goes beyond mere description and entails a criticism of the political climate and a proposal for different forms of national identification. Sarah Upstone argues that,

> Rather than focusing our attention on immediate socio-political contexts, cultural imaginaries ask us to consider how places and communities have been represented over time and to ask how attitudes to national and international identities and alliances exist as a result of a long process of representation. The individual cultural text (be it visual, cinematic, or written) exists as part of a complex cultural matrix of often reinforcing representations that produce a dominant cultural discourse surrounding issues of identity. It is not one text that tells us how to vote, for certain – but rather a plethora of texts that shape our sense of who and what we are in the contemporary moment. (Eaglestone 2018, 47-48)

As Upstone maintains, it is through a protracted "process of representation" that a national identity can be constructed through narration. Literature is a product of the culture it inhabits, and literary texts often reinforce dominant cultural discourses. On the other hand, other times, they contest and subvert them. In this sense, literature can create an alternate version of the nation, "a story may, likewise, welcome you in and make you feel like you belong not only in that story but in a place and in a community and in a nation" (Eaglestone 2018, 56). The study of Brexit novels unfolds along this

trajectory, as one has to embrace a larger focus and consider whether they support or rather reject dominant cultural discourses. Even if not conclusive, the present thesis offers a preliminary analysis of how Brexit novels engage in a meaningful dialogue with society, considering various pivotal questions posed by the contemporary identity crisis. The way in which several novelists responded to the Brexit moment outlines a shared determination to endorse a more progressive, outward-looking, and multicultural nation. The study conducted in this dissertation revealed how these writers use their stories to explore the complexities of national identity in contemporary Britain. Through imaginative narration, they make explicit how Brexit has influenced the cultural and political landscape, as well as the existence and lifestyles of private citizens. This thesis provides insights into how literature can help us understand and address complex social issues. It emphasises the role of fiction in promoting mutual understanding and encouraging dialogue between people with different backgrounds, perspectives, and worldviews. Literature has the potential to create an alternative way to see the nation because "whoever makes up the story makes up the world". As Daniel states, in *Autumn*, it is essential to "always try to welcome people into the home of your story" (Smith 2016, 79), creating a more empathetic and hospitable form of narration to imagine a more welcoming world.

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